

# WITH A BLIGHTED TOUCH

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## EXCERPT

### CHAPTER 1

#### **Within Arm's Reach**

To twelve-year-old Christopher “Kit” McNeil, summer was the greatest time of the year. It was even better than Christmas. Sure, there was a lot of buildup to Christmas Eve and the anticipation of Christmas morning, but it was just a single day. On December 26, everything pretty much went back to normal. By New Year’s the tree, brown and shedding needles, lay beside the road like an accident victim no one had bothered to help. Cardboard boxes held together with masking tape were stuffed with lights, tinsel, and ornaments, and stored away in the attic.

But summer was different. It lasted three whole months. The days stretched together, filled with bike riding, and ice cubes made from cherry Kool-Aid, and the unmistakable tang of chlorine from the town pool. Most families took vacations during that time.

Other people’s families. Not Kit’s. Too expensive, his father always said.

His friend Troy Wallace’s family did though. Sometimes he’d bring Kit a T-shirt from St. Louis or a bottle of sand from Destin, Florida.

If summer held one drawback for Kit, it was being stuck in Black Rock without Troy. Kit had few friends, and when Troy was away on vacation, he felt lost. That week seemed to drag on forever. He slept in when he could, mowed the lawn when his father ordered him to, and rode his bicycle to no place in particular. At night Kit watched reruns on television with his mom or sat by his open window putting together plastic model kits. He drew a red star on the calendar to mark Troy’s return.

Which had been four days ago.

Tonight was the first time in over three weeks that Kit had gotten to sleep over at his friend’s house. Kit didn’t like having Troy over to his house, because he never knew what kind of mood his father would be in. Albert McNeil had made it clear he didn’t care to have any more kids around.

Troy’s mother had taken them to Moviehound Video & Tanning in Black Rock Plaza to pick out two movies. “Only two to make it fair,” Mrs. Wallace always said. “One for Kit and one for Troy.” On the way home she’d picked up a pizza for them at DiVeccio’s Italian Kitchen. After the double feature of *Terror Train*—Kit’s choice—and *Alligator* (which was the best Troy

could find after his mother nixed *The Gates of Hell*), they had gone out to the green Coleman tent set up in the backyard. They'd walked around the neighborhood after Troy's parents went to sleep and had only just gotten back into the tent when Mrs. Wallace called to them.

"Kit? Troy? Are you boys awake?"

The boys heard the back door close and footsteps cross the yard. They pushed the flaps aside and watched her approach in her housecoat. She stopped in front of them.

"Kit, your mother is on the phone. She needs to talk to you," Mrs. Wallace said in a concerned tone.

"Huh? What for?" Kit asked.

Her mouth pinched and she motioned him out of the tent. "I-it's important."

In the kitchen, the receiver lay on the counter, the white spiral cord coiled like an albino serpent.

"Hello?" Kit said.

"Hey, it's Mom. I— Hold on."

Kit heard her talking softly to his father in the background. "Mom? What's going on?"

"Honey, I need to come and get you. We've got to go to Murfreesboro. Your uncle Arnold... H-he's been in an accident. We've got to go."

"Right *now*?" Kit asked. Selfishness flared in him. He didn't want to leave. As far as the boys were concerned, the night was just getting started. Kit still wanted to go bike riding around town in the early morning hours like they'd planned. He didn't want to go to Murfreesboro for something that didn't sound all that urgent to him.

"Can I just stay here with Troy?"

Kit's mother cleared her throat. "Mrs. Wallace was kind enough to offer, but no, you need to be with us. It's...it doesn't sound good."

"Please, Mom?" he pleaded.

"No, this is something we have to do as a family. I'll be over to get you in a few minutes. I've got a lot to do in a short amount of time, so be ready."

"But I've got my bike over here."

"You can get it when we get back."

"Lemme just ride it home. I can be there in ten minutes." He twirled the phone cord around his finger.

"I will come get you."

"I can ride home while you're doing all the other stuff you said you had to do."

There was silence on the other end of the line, followed by more muffled voices in the background. "Okay, fine. But I want you on your way as soon as you hang up. You've got ten minutes."

Kit accepted the minor victory. "Okay."

"Be careful. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

He handed the receiver to Mrs. Wallace. Troy followed Kit back to the tent and helped him collect his things. It was a little after one o'clock in the morning when Kit rode down the

driveway and into the deserted street. The wind pushed his hair away from his forehead as he zipped down the hill out of Troy's subdivision.

*I wonder what kind of accident it was,* Kit thought.

He had always liked Uncle Arnold. Sometimes he wondered why he couldn't have been Arnold's son rather than Albert's. His uncle had always treated him with kindness and love, and he seemed to enjoy having Kit around. Kit felt guilty about his attitude on the phone. The more he thought about his uncle, the faster he pedaled.

His route took him straight through downtown Black Rock. He crept past the old brick buildings that lined the street on either side, guarded by silver parking meters. There were no cars parked along the sidewalks, and none moved on the street. The traffic lights blinked yellow.

Kit coasted to rest his legs for a moment. He looked toward the nearest building and realized someone was watching him. The person stood in the shadow of a recessed doorway that led up to a set of ramshackle apartments.

Probably one of the town winos his father was always griping about or somebody who couldn't sleep.

Kit turned to face the road again and noticed another person in front of the furniture store. And another in the doorway of the department store.

And the doorway after that.

And the one after that.

A figure lurked in every alley and entrance on both sides of the street. All had hooked noses and wide-set eyes. Everything else about them was indistinct, like a group of cookies made with the same cutter. Yet something about their features sent a chill through Kit despite the muggy night air.

He heard footsteps and looked over his shoulder. The figures were disengaging from the shadows after he rode past. They crossed the sidewalks and merged into a group that walked stiffly down the middle of the street after him.

Kit pedaled faster as the street began a gradual uphill climb. Another glance showed the group was getting larger. Breathing heavily, Kit stood and pedaled up the incline. He didn't remember this hill being so steep before. His wheels slowed; his momentum lessened. It was like riding through syrup.

His pursuers drew closer. Footsteps increased in speed and rhythm. Kit knew he shouldn't, but he looked back anyway.

The group, thirty strong by now, started to run toward him. The distance between them closed.

"Leave me alone!" Kit yelled over his shoulder.

His bicycle was barely moving forward. Sweat covered his brow as he stomped the pedals. He knew he could get off and run, but something held him to the seat. Then his momentum was gone. The bicycle wobbled.

Dozens of identical hands reached for him.