

Chapter One

Just Trust Me

Graydon Phillips pulled the keys from the ignition, folding himself down to get out of his car and walked through the patches of darkness at the corner of the parking lot back into the light where the corner of the dormitory jutted into the petunias. As he walked up the steps and punched the buzzer, he took off his glasses, which as usual were smudged. He found a clean paper napkin in his pocket and began cleaning them.

Inside, the front desk monitor swung around in his chair like a sentinel caught sleeping on duty. Through the glass door Graydon watched him take the front door keys from the drawer and shamble across the lobby.

Graydon remembered the night when he was a kid in Nigeria-the night his parents had found the newborn native child in a fruit packing box on the porch of their mission home. He remembered standing there in the patch of light from the doorway with Mom and Dad, shivering and staring down at the tiny puckered mouth making hungry noises. The wide eyes, too young to fear strangers, but amazed at the brightness of the light.

He remembered his mother reaching out to the baby and his father on the phone calling the local police station and the baby crying at last even with Mother cuddling it against her white terry robe.

He pictured himself now, as if he were that abandoned infant, and he laughed bitterly. Two hundred and twenty pounds of me, six-foot-six of me, he thought, crammed into a small dumpster maybe. Abandoned in Collegedale by parents who no longer love each other and don't want me around to mess up their plans.

The desk monitor fumbled with the lock for several seconds, but he finally opened the door.

"Well, you got your dad off for London," he said affably.

Graydon awoke the next morning to his roommate Jephtha doing some kind of ritual shower music, not singing, but a strange burble that reminded Graydon of a whistle he'd had as a little kid-a plastic goldfinch that warbled and blew bubbles from its open mouth. Graydon turned from his side to his back and stared at the ceiling while Jeph finished a "Christian rock" tune and twittered into his version of a

deodorant commercial. Graydon swung out of bed and pulled on his jeans.

As hot as it was going to be today, they'd both need that deodorant.

"Hey, Jeph!" "Yeah?"

"When you going over to the gym to register?"

"What time is it now?"

"Five after eight."

"Should've been there already." His roommate emerged from the shower wrapped in a blue towel, his short-cropped hair oozing like a black water-soaked sponge.

"B's is first. They'll be a hundred people in line ahead of me."

"I'm farther down the alphabet. P's are scheduled for after lunch. I should see about a job while I'm waiting."

Graydon tried to figure in his head how many hours a week he'd have to work to make the twelve thousand dollars he'd saved last for two years. Dad's voice echoed in his head.

"You're twenty-one. You want to do it your way. Go ahead. But you're on your own. Just remember that. I've given you a big piece out of my life. I don't owe you anything."

After breakfast at a table by himself in the cafeteria, he threaded his way through the halls of the administration building following arrows indicating where to find the personnel office and student labor assignments. The sign on the door said "Ellsworth Hetke, Personnel."

There were three girls ahead of him. He noticed that they had their class schedules already and were finding job assignments to fit their free time.

"I haven't registered yet," he apologized when it was his turn.

"How old are you?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Twenty."

"What kind of recommendations can you get?" He slapped a job application on the desk in front of him. Graydon was startled by his tone.

"Pretty good, I think."

Graydon filled it out, including names of people he'd worked for—loading trucks for UPS, security guard at Parisian, dormitory chaplain—and showed his proof of U.S. citizenship.

"Can you work early mornings? Evenings?" The man behind the desk didn't wait for a response. He picked up the phone and jabbed

four numbers with his pointer finger as if he meant to punish the phone for something.

"Security? I have the man you want. If he'll fit in the patrol car." With hand over the mouthpiece he added, "Campus Safety's in Lynn Wood Hall. Ground floor, far end. You can get there from here, but it won't be easy." Hetke drew an imaginary map with his finger on the desktop.

The stairwell was warmer than the hallway, and outdoors must be 95 degrees, Graydon thought as he walked across the sidewalk and up the stairs to Lynn Wood Hall. Outdoors the air was thick with apple/cinnamon from the McKee's Foods Plant 1 at the end of Industrial Drive.

Mr. Tyrell, head of Campus Safety, motioned Graydon to sit down.

"Hetke was right. We've been looking for someone your size to drive the patrol car from three a.m. until seven."

He explained the requirements of the job, made the phone calls to check out the references Graydon gave him, then scrawled his name across the job assignment.

"I don't think we have a uniform your size, but give the secretary your measurements and we'll give you a badge."

Leaving the office, Graydon glanced at the pay scale at the bottom of his copy of the work agreement he had just signed. Less than \$5.50 an hour. Still, he'd asked for a work-study program with a government grant. A campus job was tied to that contract, he guessed. Not much he could do about that. Besides, he would save quite a bit on gas and car maintenance not having to drive to work each day. Major consideration! So his 1984 Escort stayed in the parking lot most of the time. At least he felt good knowing he owned its title clear and the insurance was paid through August a year from now.

"I know one thing. I'm going to have to keep this car running until I graduate." Dad had warned him about the propensity of older used cars to swallow up a fortune in repairs. But no use even thinking about a nearly new one-which would cost the equivalent of a couple years' tuition

At eleven he went to the chapel for the first of this week's freshman orientation convocations. As he looked around the room, a wave of loneliness struck him full in the chest. He realized that no matter which direction he looked, there wasn't a single freshman he knew by name.

A thirty-something woman introduced herself as Terrie Ruff, the coordinator of “freshman experience.”

“College is not a vending machine,” she began. “I’ll guarantee you’ll put in the money, but it won’t automatically spit out the grades or eventually a degree.” For the next half hour she raced them through what she said might be the most important lecture of the school year—how to live through the first semester in college.

Graydon jotted down a few of her maxims:

“Get a daily planner. Write down everything you are expected to do for every single day. Don’t trust your memory.”

“Set aside regular study hours.”

“Take a break in the middle of studying and do whatever you want to for about fifteen minutes.”

She made a big deal out of stress. “It’s a killer,” she warned. “But remember that it can only be handled by you, not by someone else. You’ll have to identify the big stressors in your own situation and learn to control them. The biggest enemy of students is inactivity. Let’s face it, most of your time in college is spent exercising your brain, not your body. Get physical. Eat right. Sleep right. Walk. Run. Get into your favorite sport.”

Graydon looked at his watch. Five to twelve.

The speaker gripped the podium with both hands and leaned toward the chapel filled with kids. “Get spiritual,” she advised. “Give yourself some total silence-time when, if the Holy Spirit has something to tell you, you can hear.”

The convocation ended with a prayer followed by a rush for the cafeteria.

Jephtha yelled from the Upper Promenade. Graydon stepped aside to let some girls pass before his roommate caught up to him.

“Let’s have a little fellowship, Brother!” Jephtha had been running, and his face was beaded with perspiration.

“Nice lady. She just forgot to tell us to get social. Best way there is to cut stress.”

A girl in an aqua sweater walking ahead of them turned. “Wrong! The more social I get, the worse my grades get.”

“Sorry, Sister,” Jeph insisted, and Graydon had a sudden mental picture of him standing behind the chapel podium gripping it with both hands delivering his own sermon. “Sorry, Sister. It’s not friends that make the problem. Like the lady said, you’re in charge of the stress factors. ‘God saw it was not good for man to live alone.’ That’s

Scripture. Word of the Lord. Don't try to contradict...." He was grinning, and the girl in the aqua sweater grinned back.

"You're much prettier smiling," Jeph said. "I say enjoy people. But you can't expect anyone to think you're enjoyin' them if you always look like your house just burned down."

Graydon opened the cafeteria door and held it for his roommate and the four girls who had clustered to be a part of the conversation.

He felt a wave of embarrassment when the girl in the aqua sweater hesitated in the hall and fell into step with him.

"Where did you begin your college social life?" she asked him.

"Just stepping out of my room, I guess," he faltered. There wasn't room at Jeph's table, so Graydon ended up eating with the girl and her friends-their choice when they followed him to a table by a window.

His roommate was leaving when he got back to the room.

Jephtha started down the hall, then turned. "Jon called. Whoever he is. Says wait. Says he wants to see you."

"Jon? Must be Jon Pittard. I haven't seen him since he lived next door in Africa. I heard he was here."

"He don't sound British like you."

"No, he's from Texas. He's not even black."

For a moment, remembering Jon, Graydon felt seven years old. He was standing on the steps of the primary school waiting for his mother to come from the mission hospital where she was a pediatrician. This sunburned white kid came roaring around the building on a bike.

"Hey. You that American nigger?" he yelled as he leaned to the right and swung in a wide circle coming back. "You live here?"

Graydon remembered his outrage and the effort it took to keep his dignity. "I'm British," he had said.

He remembered a lot of other encounters before Jon Pittard started being his friend. But mostly he remembered the absolute loyalty which had grown between them during the next three years and their fierce competition to get the best grades. He'd known how Jon got his A's-almost from the beginning. But he had never told. Never even considered telling.

Graydon unlocked his door and swung it back to let the stale air from his room exchange into the hallway. He laid his Campus Security badge on the desk beside his Bible and splashed his face with cold water at the sink just as Jon came to the door-five feet, ten inches, Graydon guessed. Same sandy hair and brick-red tan. Same brilliant blue eyes and Care Bear smile. Same Jon, just adult size now.

Jon flung one leg over the back of the chair and spun it around so that he ended up sitting on it backward, his chin resting on his arms folded across the back.

“Man, are you done growing yet?”

Graydon bridled. “You know, I’d kind of like it if sometime somebody noticed something about me besides my size. Like my intelligence or my charm or...”

“Yeah, man, when your charm or intelligence get that obvious. What’s your major?”

“Theology.”

“Really? You always used to say you were going to be a doctor. Mine’s accounting. My parents made a deal with me. I do my B.S. here, and they’ll pay for my Master’s and CPA at the University.”

Jon looked him up and down, mentally measuring him, Graydon guessed. “How you like Southern?”

“Pretty good.”

“What’s wrong with Oakwood? You get tired of it?”

“Since Dad’s not at Alabama A&M in Huntsville, I had no real reason to stay on there after academy.”

“So what’s with your dad? How come he left Oakwood? I mean he had a good thing going. Everybody coming our way raved about him.”

Graydon wondered. How much should he tell his boyhood pal, how much did Jon already know.

“You know Dad’s from London...”

Jon shrugged and flipped his hair out of his eyes. “Oh, yeah, but what does that have to do with...?”

“He had a friend at this really exclusive school.”

“So, he lit out for Jolly Ol’ England. What’s your Mom think of that idea?”

Graydon winced. Obviously Jon hadn’t heard about his family in cons. He tried to think of a nice, objective way to explain everything to Jon. No sense trying to hide the truth. Jon would find out.

“How long’s it been since we left the mission?” Graydon asked, buying time to collect himself.

“Five-hey, no-seven years.”

Graydon sat down on the floor and crossed his legs, leaning back against the edge of the bed.

“It was the next year-when I was in eighth grade in Alabama. I guess you didn’t hear Mother left us for a CEO.”

He watched the shock register on Jon’s face before he went on.

“Yeah, Dad and I were about that surprised too. Kind of threw us for a while. Dad sent me off to boarding school the next fall where things would be a little easier to handle.”

“Only they weren’t,” Jon guessed.

Graydon nodded, remembering the weeks at a time without a letter or a phone call from Dad, without knowing where Mother was, if she ever regretted what she had done, if she would ever come back. He remembered coming home his sophomore year, trying to attend the prep school on the college campus, the first few months of learning to live with the hollow sound of his own footsteps in the front hall when he came home from school. The way Dad holed up in his study every evening correcting papers from his literature students.

By then Dad had moved to Alabama A&M. Better pay, more prestige, he said.

Graydon remembered how he felt one night when Dad came out to the kitchen where he was getting a glass of juice from the refrigerator. Dad stood there, his shoulders hunched from sitting so long at his desk, his eyes tired from reading stacks of book reviews.

“Well, son. At least you have me. You’ll always have me. You can count on that.”

He remembered swallowing the cold juice slowly, mouthful after mouthful coursing like liquid ice, chilling his esophagus and then his stomach until he held the empty glass and stared through the foggy, distorting cylinder at Dad. He had finally made himself respond.

“Sure, Dad. Thanks.” And like every night, they had studied the youth Bible lesson together and prayed and gone to bed. Not talking to each other, just doing the right thing out of habit.

Jon hitched in the chair, obviously uncomfortable when he wasn’t talking but not knowing what to say.

“But your family was always so cool. Your dad was so cool. How could your mom....I mean how could any CEO compete with a guy as cool as your dad?”

Graydon shivered involuntarily. “Cool? Yeah, he’s cool all right.”

“So why didn’t you go back to Oakwood anyway? I mean, with all your friends there, and....”

Graydon slid down until the back of his neck rested on the edge of the mattress. He began to feel an oozy, out-of-focus comfort moving slowly up his neck and into his temples.

“That’s just it. I’ve been working full time since I graduated. Money, you know. Dad’s got a new life to think about-which doesn’t

include either me or God. Plus I needed to get away from everybody who knows me real well. It's hard to keep my balance with everybody wondering how soon I'll mess up and fall on my face, too."

"I suppose so."

"It's not like we don't have enough blacks on this campus to constitute a community of faith." Graydon laughed.

"So what's funny?" Jon flashed a quizzical look.

"Nothing." The irony of it! It had been Dad who repeatedly voiced dire warnings about his friendship with Jon.

"Son," he would say, "Jon may seem like harmless fun, but he's the kind of friend who can do nothing but undermine your faith and morals. Even when he's not actively malicious, he's shortsighted and foolish." All that about a kid eleven years old! Yeah, Dad. Shortsighted and foolish! Now who's the fool?

"Son," he would say, "people will judge you by the company you keep."

Sure, Dad. What kind of company are you keeping now?

"Son," he would warn, "it doesn't look good for you to be friends with a boy like Jon. People watch a teacher's family. We need to be an example to the community of faith."

Dad, what do you think people say when they see you with Shelly? Well, she looks good enough to make the cover of *Cosmopolitan*. She wouldn't even have to take off any clothes for the photographer.

He remembered the last time he had seen Dad with Shelly. Dad moving like a basketball star dressed up in a suit and tie for something formal. Shelly prissing along beside him on heels so high she would probably kill herself on them if she wasn't hanging all over Dad. Looking up at him that way. Dad's eyes caressing all that bare skin. Talk about a fool! Well, Dad was always big on appearances. Let people look.

That was just before he finished high school-when they left for London.

Jon shook his head as if he had been swimming and had water in his ears. "But your dad was always so cool."

"Sure," Graydon conceded. "Until his fall, of course." He rolled over and sprang to his feet. "I'm supposed to register in half an hour."

"Hey, Man! Freshmen register today. You're not a freshman?"

"Yeah, I am."