

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

A person wearing a dark, heavy winter coat and a hood is walking away from the viewer on a snow-covered path. The path leads towards a suburban neighborhood with several houses and trees in the background. The scene is set in winter, with snow on the ground and trees. The overall tone is somewhat somber and contemplative.

KAREN
NESBITT

***SUBJECT
TO CHANGE***

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: In this novel for teens, fifteen-year-old Declan struggles to make sense of his older brother's delinquency, his father's sexuality and his feelings for a girl who is way out of his league.

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*In memory of Dad and Fabien, who were loving men of
quiet fortitude. And for boys who can't ask for help.*

ONE

I'm standing outside the rink on a smoke break. An old blue Ford Taurus with mags and no muffler pulls up beside me. I'm wondering what kind of loser thinks that's cool when I realize my brother's sitting in the passenger seat. He cranks the window down.

“Hey, dickhead!” he yells.

I shake my head and butt out my cigarette in the can attached to the side of the building. In two steps I can easily cross the sidewalk to the car, but I take my time. The gravel I just spread on the ice crackles under my boots. The sky is gray, like we're going to get wet snow.

I lean close to Seamus because I can't hear over the motor, but I don't say anything. He's being a jerk. The usual.

“Hey, asshole, you got any cash?”

“Nope.” *Not for you.* There's such a cocky look on his face. I recognize the driver of the piece-of-crap car. He goes to my school and isn't old enough to have a license.

Seamus probably told him it would be easy to get me to hand the money over.

Seamus elbows his friend, who's grinning like an eager puppy with its tongue hanging out. "Aw, c'mon! Me 'n' Rob, we were hopin' to score some E, and maybe some chicks!" He elbows him again. "It's Sa'rday night, right, bro?"

My brother and his juvenile-delinquent friend chair dance in the car like they're going to party right here in front of me. Seamus laughs way too loud. I'm embarrassed by them, but I can't help watching. They're such freaks. He pulls a big Evian bottle out of his coat, takes a swig and passes it to Rob. They're drinking something murky and brown.

"Get lost, Seamus." I shove my hands into my jacket pockets and turn my back on them.

"Huh? What did ya say, dickhead? C'mere." His favorite nickname for me is dickhead. He thinks it sounds like Declan.

"Get lost. I gotta go back to work."

"Oooh, didya hear that, Robbie? He tol' me t'get lost!" I look back, slowly, cool. Robbie has an idiotic smile pasted on his face. None of this is sinking into his tiny brain.

"Go home, Seamus. You're hammered." I start back toward the rink.

"You're fuckin' gay, dickhead!"

I spin around with my fist ready to pound the car, but Robbie guns it, and I just catch the back fender as one white-wall sprays me with a grimy mixture of slush, sand and salt.

Fuckin' asshole brother and his puke-faced friends.

Inside, I clean myself off with paper towel before I take down the *Back in 10 Minutes* sign and open the canteen window. I'm just in time for the rush on slushies after a hockey practice. Seven-year-old boys and their parents line up for crushed ice, sugar and enough food coloring to turn their teeth bright blue.

When the rush is over I wonder if I should call 9-1-1. Rat Seamus and Robbie out to the cops.

Then I decide not to.

Why?

I grab a cloth and start to Windex the fridge doors.

Why not call the cops?

Because he's my brother.

Yeah right. He hasn't been a brother for years.

Because they'll put him in jail.

So? It'd be a night of guaranteed peace for the whole neighborhood. He barely sleeps at home these days anyway.

Who'd miss him?

It'll upset Mom.

Well, someone has to do something. One of these days he's going to kill himself or someone else. Then what?

Because he'll kill me.

Really?

I'm used to him being bigger and older and meaner than me. But I'm probably taller than him now. I was six foot two when the phys ed teacher measured us in the fall for some national fitness torture program. But I have to be honest. At 145 pounds I make a garden rake look hefty.

Whack!

Stunned, I turn around to see what hit me in the left shoulder. There's a yellow ball, one of those foam things you get at the dollar store, rolling away from my feet. I look across the room at a kid, frozen, with a hockey stick in one hand.

"Hey! The sign says *Absolutely no playing hockey!* Do it again, you're out!" I glare at him for effect. "Get it?" I squeeze the ball in my fist and stick it in my pocket.

He nods and walks over to his dad, puts the stick down on his bag and starts to drink his chocolate milk. He peers at me over the plastic container, and I give him the evil eye again just for good measure.

I actually like kids. You kind of have to if you're going to survive working at the rink. But you have to get tough with little boys right away or they won't respect you. Pretty soon they'll be having food fights in the canteen. Then the parents will take them home, and I'll get stuck cleaning up the mess.

Running the canteen is a pretty good gig. Easy. I get to do my own thing. And I get tips, especially from the moms. When it's not busy, I shoot the shit with Phil, the Zamboni guy.

Things quiet down. Just before the boy with the chocolate milk and his dad leave, I chuck the kid his ball, and I'm by myself again. The only sounds for now are the blast of the coach's whistle from inside the rink and the hum of the big fridge. In fifteen minutes, Phil will get the Zamboni out and do rink two. Just before the next rush.

I finish cleaning the fridge doors. Phil walks into the canteen and motions for me to come outside for a smoke.

I grab a shovel at the door to push away the slush while I'm out there. I hate the in-between weather. Not spring. Not winter. Just god-awful slippery, filthy mess everywhere.

Phil's holding his smoke pack open for me to take one as I walk toward him. I fish my lighter out of the pocket of my big winter jacket and light both our smokes. It takes a few tries because the wind is picking up. There'll probably be a blizzard tonight.

The idea of Seamus and Robbie the Moron driving around drunk in a blizzard bothers me. I don't like Seamus much, but I still don't want him to kill himself. It would destroy Mom. So many kids get in car accidents on the narrow country roads out here. Seems like every year there's a funeral, and there are flowers tied to trees and lampposts all over the place. Last June a kid trying to pass slammed head on into a gravel truck from the quarry. The truck swerved and ended up on its side, dumping sand all over the ditch, and the kid lost his arm because he had it out the window. Freaked everyone out. Must've hurt like hell.

Aw, why do I keep thinking about my asshole brother?

Phil taps his watch, stamps his cigarette out on the ground and kicks the butt onto the street. "Later." He's going in to do the rink.

I pick up the shovel and clear the crap away from in front of the automatic door. Two more cycles like this—break, canteen rush, clean up, Zamboni—and I'll be on my way home.

If Seamus is partying, at least he won't show up there.