

CHAPTER ONE

The whimpers had eased and the boy studied the black-masked face before him. Icy blue eyes stared back at him.

“Don’t be scared.”

The boy frowned and slowly shook his head. “I’m not. It’s quiet again.”

“Yeah, but it’s about to get noisy again soon. There’s going to be a lot of policeman carrying big guns, wearing scary uniforms and shouting as they pour into this place. And when you get outside, there’s going to be a lot of people, shouting and flashing their cameras at you and trying to ask questions. So do you know what you have to do?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all, because your mama will be there and she won’t allow anyone to get too close. She’s a scary woman is your mother.”

The boy smiled knowingly. “Are you going to be with me too?”

“No, I’ll be gone before then.”

The innocent face became worried again, turning away to stare at the bodies strewn about on the concrete floor of the warehouse. Blood was splattered on concrete pillars. A severed hand still held a tight grip on a pistol. Intestines spilled out from one of the bodies.

“I don’t want to be left alone with them.”

“It won’t be for long, I promise. They can’t hurt you anymore... ever.”

“Are they in Heaven now?”

“No. I’m fairly certain I sent them straight to Hell.”

The boy nodded and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “They were bad. They shouted a lot and were mean to me, because I didn’t know what they were saying.” His lip trembled as he looked down at his wet pants. “They wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom.”

The masked head nodded. “Yeah, I know, I’m sorry I couldn’t come sooner.”

“Are you like Batman?”

The man grinned. “Maybe a little, not as cool as Batman though.”

“That means you can’t take your mask off, can you?”

“I’d rather not.”

“I want to see your face. I promise I won’t tell anyone your secret identity.”

The man paused from his task and looked up at him. “I need to finish this first so you can get back to your parents.”

The boy looked down at the red, black and white wires on the device strapped to his body. Two of them had been snipped, but three remained intact.

“Why did they put this thing on me?”

“They wanted your father to give them a lot of money, and then they wanted to escape without getting in trouble with the police. This device is like an alarm clock to tell everyone they are allowed to come get you now.”

“Can’t you just take it off me now?”

“No, because this particular alarm happens to be very noisy and we don’t want to set it off. I have to cut one more wire to stop it, but they’ve tried to trick me by messing around with the colours of these wires. I don’t want to cut the wrong one, but we’re getting a bit short on time.”

“The white one,” the boy said.

“You reckon? I was kind of thinking the black one might be the go.”

“No. Everyone thinks black is bad and white is good. In the cowboy movies, the bad man always wears a black hat. So if they are tricking you, that’s what they want you to think, but I think the white one is the bad one.”

“That’s some explanation, but I see your point.” the man smiled. With a deep sigh, he reached up to pull off his mask. “So this is me.”

The boy’s face lit up as he looked at the face of his rescuer. His smile got wider as he took in the weathered features of a good-looking face. His unruly hair was thick and black.

The boy reached out and touched the man’s cheek, grinning as his fingers traced the lines in his face and felt the scratch of coarse stubble. He studied the eyes looking at him which were the lightest of blue.

“You have funny eyes.”

“Yeah, a lot of people tell me that.”

“I like them.”

“Just remember,” the man smiled. “You have to keep my secret identity.”

“I promise, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good boy.” He looked down at the device. “So the white one is your choice. You sure about that?”

The boy nodded firmly.

The man frowned and looked at the twelve seconds remaining on the clock. “I really, really like that black one.”

“No,” the boy giggled. “The white one.”

“Okay, but if you’re wrong it’s going to be a very noisy alarm.”

“Cut the white one. Cut the white one.”

He watched gleefully as the man brought the pliers to the white wire and placed the snippers on either side of it. His hand trembled a little as he glanced at the four seconds remaining. With a deep shuddering breath, he made the cut.

The clock stopped and the boy threw his arms up victoriously. “I win.”

The man fell back on his backside and laughed weakly, wiping some sweat from his brow.

“I’ve never felt better about losing. Good call, kid.” He got back to a crouch and carefully stripped the devise and its harness from the small body.

After his burst of excitement, the boy yawned and slumped in his chair. “Can I go home now?”

“Sure.” The man glanced around at the three bodies lying in congealing pools of blood. It had been a necessitated carnage, eliminating them with a blade rather than a bullet. He couldn’t chance alerting the authorities outside who would have come running. The boy had silently watched the entirety of the swift brutal bloodbath. How he wasn’t stupefied with terror was uncanny. The thought of leaving him alone, even for a few minutes, had lost its allure.

“I’m going to take you to the stairs,” He said, taking the boy’s hand. “You have to walk down them very carefully and when you get to the bottom, you’ll find your mother waiting for you.”

The boy frowned. “Will my Papa be there?”

“No.”

The small face grew sombre. “Did he have another important business meeting?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“I can’t.” The man picked up the blood-soaked ski mask and pulled it back over his face.

The boy nodded and suddenly launched forward to wrap his arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

“Are you going to come visit me?”

“I’ll check in on you from time to time, but even if you don’t see me, I’ll still be watching, making sure no one ever hurts you again. So forget all this, because there’s no need to be scared ever again.”

The boy pulled back, frowning and studying the strange eyes, seemingly assessing the truth of the statement. Slowly he nodded. “Okay, I won’t. I won’t ever be scared again.”

The man picked him up and looked around, his instincts seeking any identifying traces of his presence. The boy had seen his face, but what he could tell them? How much faith would they invest in a nine-year old’s testimony. Besides, his mother would make sure no one questioned him too closely.

The boy yawned again and rested his head on Dylan’s shoulder. It was somewhat disturbing how calm he was after his five-day ordeal, ending with the brutal demise of his kidnappers. His parents faced a difficult obligation to ensure he would get the right therapy and not be further subjected to any ongoing trauma.

For a moment, Dylan held the boy tighter before his mind switched back to the necessity of getting out silently and unseen, as if he’d never been there.