

Chapter One

Sleep had eluded him all night, but when Billy heard the heavy thud of footsteps outside his bedroom, he closed his eyes and pretended slumber, hoping they would move past. When the floorboard at the foot of his bed creaked, Billy peered through slitted eyes at the large shape that stood there.

"I know you're awake, so you'd best open your eyes."

Billy looked up to see a monster standing rock-like at the foot of his bed. Dressed in his father's clothes, wearing his father's face, it loomed over him like a nightmare.

"Don't leave the house. I expect to find you right here at home when I get back. Understand?"

"You can't keep me here. I'm eighteen, and if I want to leave, I'll find a way."

"You got nowhere to go that I can't find you. First place I'd look would be at Marty's. And then I'd have to go and have a little talk with him."

"I wouldn't go there. Leave Marty out of this."

"You want him out of this, do as I say. It's up to you." The shadowed figure left the room.

"Not Marty," Billy whispered.

He waited until he heard the front door open and close, the car start and drive away, then waited ten minutes more before he moved. He walked slowly to the bathroom and took a long shower, letting the warm water sluice over his body, trying to rinse away the memory and pain of the previous night.

As he dried off, he caught his reflection in the mirror. Blue eyes stared back, surprised that – despite the recent horrors – his blond hair was as straight and fine as always. He was still small for his age, and still too thin. He saw the bruises that covered his body, the purple marks on his cheek, the cut and swollen lip, the shadows under his eyes...and something deep inside that struggled to reach the surface.

"No."

He turned away before that terrible thing could be recognized.

He dressed in boxers, loose sweatpants, and an oversized tee shirt; trudged barefoot down the short hall to the living room; and sat on the couch. He didn't open the blinds or turn on any lights. He was trapped deep in the monster's lair, and it should be dark. His dad would be home after work, and nothing would change. He was too scared, too small, and too full of pain and despair to do anything about his situation. He could only endure. He huddled in a corner of the couch until, at last, he fell into a thin, uneasy sleep.

Marty carried a load of clean clothes to his bedroom and dumped them haphazardly into dresser drawers. He walked to the living room, spotted his dad on the patio, and stepped outside. His dad was staring at the swimming pool, but Marty didn't think he was seeing it. "What's wrong?"

Dan Baxter turned his head and smiled. "What makes you think anything's wrong?" His face was as calm and relaxed as always.

Marty dropped into an empty chair. "I'm your son. I've known you for eighteen years. Give me credit for a little insight." He nudged his dad's knee with a bare foot. "Come on, talk to me."

"I was just thinking – another school year finished for you. One more, and you'll be heading out. Maybe we should do something special this summer."

"Didn't look like you were thinking of ways to have fun. Looked more like you were a little sad." He pulled his feet under his chair and leaned forward. "If you don't wanna tell me what's wrong, that's up to you, but don't dodge it with bull, okay?"

"Fair enough." Dan looked back out at the pool. "Laundry all done?"

So, he isn't gonna talk about it. "Yeah. I'm ready to go, if you're ready to take me."

"Let me grab my wallet and shoes." Dan stood, stretched, and walked into the house.

Marty followed slowly, thinking he'd call his mom later. *Something's got Dad down. Mom will know what to do.*

Dan emerged from his bedroom to find Marty waiting at the door to the garage. "I'll be glad when your car's out of the shop, child of mine. All right, let's go."

"You don't have to come with me. I won't be gone that long. Just to pick Billy up, start the summer off right."

"Oh no. I'd be all day waiting for you to get back. Time's a foreign concept when you two are together." He got in the Taurus, started it up, and waited for his son to buckle up. "I know you own a watch, but I never see you wear it."

"It's somewhere in my room. Every now and then I hear it beep. Annoying sucker. You better hope I don't find it. I'll hide it in your room when I do."

Dan chuckled and pulled out of the driveway. "So what do you and Billy have planned for the summer?"

"Nothing much, so far." Marty paused, chewing on a knuckle. "Would you be disappointed in me if I said I don't want to start college right after I graduate next year?"

"Puzzled, but not disappointed." A little longer to delay the departure of the fledgling bird? I could live with that. "Why?"

When Marty didn't answer, Dan glanced over at him. Looking at his son was like looking into a mirror on the past and seeing himself at eighteen: the same dark hair and large, brown eyes, and the same broad-shouldered, lean build. Marty was nearly six feet tall already, and would probably surpass Dan's height of six-one before he was done growing.

"Marty?"

"Um, well, Billy was saying he'd probably work for a year before he started college. That would give him time to save some money. He'll be offered scholarships, probably, but they don't cover everything. And he isn't sure where he wants to go to school, so he figured he'd take a year to figure it out. I thought it sounded good. I could use a break after twelve years of school, you know?"

Dan returned his attention to the road ahead. "Well, there wouldn't be much point in going to college if your heart wasn't in it." He was sure there was more to his son's reluctance to leave than just wanting to stay with his friend, but he didn't press for the reason. Marty would tell him when he was ready. "If that's what you want, son, I won't argue."

"Thanks, Dad."

They drove through Welko, passing small shops and strip malls, everything quiet on this first day of summer vacation. People were no doubt huddled inside to escape the fierce Utah sun. He turned onto Stratmore, a dead end street, and pulled in at the curb just beyond the detached garage of a two-bedroom bungalow. It stood out from its neighbors in this tidy residential area. It was in need of a facelift and a new roof, and its general air of neglect always made Dan's heart ache for Marty's friend.

"Go on, I'll wait out here. Just don't take too long." Marty hopped out of the car, and Dan watched him bound up the sidewalk. He didn't like coming over here, didn't like his son spending time in this house. Billy was a great kid, but his dad was someone Dan would prefer Marty stay away from. Far away. Thankfully, Lloyd Webber was most likely at work.

The doorbell yanked Billy from a dismal dream of pain and terror. He walked around the couch to the front door and looked through the narrow window beside it. Marty stood there, tall and fit, dark hair shaggy and curling on his neck, his skin already bronzing from the hot desert sun. *Oh God. I forgot he was coming over today.*

Billy's heart hammered. He remembered the dark threat in his father's words that morning. He opened the door a few inches, just enough to see his friend clearly, and felt the sun for the first time that day. "Marty, go away. I...I can't go out today."

Marty's brown eyes widened. "What? Why not? What's wrong?"

"I...I don't feel so great. Coming down with something, maybe." He kept his head down, waiting for Marty to leave.

"That sucks, but we can just chill at the house, play video games."

A car drove slowly past on the narrow road. Billy opened the door wider and looked down the street quickly, but it wasn't his dad's car. Still, if he came home for lunch, if Marty was there, his dad might... No, he couldn't let that happen. "Please, Marty, you gotta go. My dad...you can't be here when he comes home. Please!"

Dark eyebrows knotted in a frown. "What happened to your face?"

"It's nothing. I...I walked into a door. You have to go away. Now."

A muscle jumped in Marty's jaw. "A door with fingers? Who hit you? Was it your dad?"

Tears welled behind Billy's eyes and he blinked furiously to hold them back. "Just go, Marty." He was frantic, and the rough fear was clear in his voice. "I don't want anything to happen to you." Why won't he leave?

Marty turned and waved his arm in an urgent, come-here gesture. Seconds later, Dr. Baxter stood on the front step.

"Oh my God, Billy. Who did this to you?" Like his son's, Dan Baxter's deep brown eyes radiated warmth and concern.

"Dr. Baxter, please, take Marty and go home. If my dad sees you..."

"Is he here? I want to talk to him."

"N-no, he's at work. But he might come by anytime. He does that."

Dan pushed the door open and stepped inside. "We're not leaving until we find out what happened."

Marty slung a friendly arm around Billy's shoulder. "Come on, pal, tell us about it. You know we'll do whatever we can to help."

Billy eased away from Marty's arm and walked slowly to the couch. Sitting down, he fastened his gaze on the worn brown carpet and wondered what to say. He opened his mouth to spin them a story, anything that would make them leave. That was something he was used to doing. Instead, he heard the horrible truth drop slowly from his mouth while tears rolled unhindered down his face. Each word had weight, and tasted like despair. He looked up at last, to see Dr. Baxter's normally friendly face tightened into lines of sorrow and anger.

"I'm calling the police." Dan reached for the phone on the coffee table.

"No! Not the cops. They won't believe me. They didn't when my mom..." He closed his mouth, cutting himself off. "They just won't." Billy paused. "I...I don't...I can't tell them." He dropped his head and stared at his feet. "He told me, if I said anything, he'd...he'd invite his buddies over to...I can't go to the police. It was my fault. I tried to leave."

He curled into the corner of the sofa and knotted his hands together, trembling. He couldn't look at Marty, knowing he'd see disgust and loathing in his face. That's the worst of it, he thought. I can't bear to meet Marty's eyes. He took my best friend away from me.

Dan leaned forward. "It wasn't your fault, son. Do you understand? You did nothing wrong. There's no shame in this for you. He's a sick man. He's also a big man, and you're very small. The damage he's done could be severe. That's why we have to report this to the police, and take you to the hospital. You need to have a doctor make sure you're all right."

"No. He'll talk his way out of it. He gets out of everything." Billy looked at the clock. Nearly one-thirty. His dad's shift ended at four. "Please, I'll be okay. I can...I'll manage, somehow. He'll be home soon, he might even come home early to check on me. He expects me to be here. I'll stay, but *Marty has to go.*"

Dr. Baxter frowned. "Marty, get my cell phone from the car, please." After his son left, Dan leaned toward Billy. "Why are you so worried about Marty?"

"He said terrible things last night. About Marty and...and he told me not to see Marty, or talk to him. I know my dad. If he finds Marty here, he'll hurt him. Please, take him away."

Marty returned and handed the phone to his dad. Dr. Baxter kept his eyes on Billy. Finally he nodded. "All right, we'll go, but I'm not leaving you here. You're coming home with us."

"If I'm gone when he gets back, it'll be worse. He said I couldn't leave, that I had to stay here. He'll know where I've gone; he'll come to your house." Billy's hand clenched on his knees. "Why won't you listen to me? This happened because I tried to leave. I figured I could, now that I'm old enough. But he knew, somehow, and he caught me before I'd gone three blocks. He won't let me go, and if you try to stop him, he'll make you pay."

Dan's mouth turned down briefly. "Don't worry. I've dealt with men like your father before. I can keep you safe."

"No, you can't. No one can. Just go, please."

Dr. Baxter leaned forward. "Listen to me, son, I give you my word he won't get near you. We aren't leaving without you. If I have to, I'll wait here until he gets back."

"I can't leave, and you can't stay. Oh, please!" He pressed his hands against his eyes.

"Billy, I know he's your dad, but after this, you can't stay here."

"He's not my dad," Billy muttered.

"What?"

"My mom told me when I found her in...before she died. My real dad was killed in a car accident, right after Mom found out she was pregnant."

Dan stared at the boy. "If we could prove that, it would make everything a lot easier."

Billy limped to the bookshelf, slipped his hand between two dusty books, and withdrew a piece of paper. He handed it to Dr. Baxter. "My birth certificate. My real dad's name is on it."

Dan glanced at the paper, took a deep breath, and smiled. "This helps. Where are your shoes?"

"By the door."

"Put them on and let's go. Marty, you drive, I have to phone Rob Sheridan. We'll go to the clinic. Don't worry, Billy, Rob's a friend and an attorney. He'll be on your side."

An hour later, they were at Dr. Baxter's medical office. There were no cars in the lot, and the building was dark. Dan drove around to his private entrance, took the boys inside, and relocked the door. He disarmed the security system and handed his cell phone to Marty.

"You wait for Rob to get here. He's a couple inches shorter than me, broader, and has blond hair. He'll call from the parking lot."

Dan led Billy from his office and through the hallway to the nearest examination room. He helped the boy onto the table, and pulled a rolling stool over for himself.

"Let me tell you what I'm going to do, all right? I'll take a blood sample, so I can run some standard tests, make sure he didn't pass anything on to you." Billy nodded. "Then I'll take x-rays, check for broken bones. Last will be the physical exam."

"That'll be painful, won't it?"

"I'll be as careful as I can, but yes, it will. I'm sorry, son; I can't give you anything for pain, yet."

"Yeah. You have to know where it hurts." Billy offered up a thin smile. "Easier to tell you where it doesn't. When do we start?"

"Right now. Let me get some information. Height, weight, that sort of thing."

"I'm five-four, and I weigh a hundred and ten pounds."

Dan wrote it on the chart. "You're seventeen, right?"

"Eighteen. Saturday was my birthday."

Helluva birthday you had, Dan thought. "That's right, you and Marty were born two days apart. Any medical problems, or allergies to food or medications?"

"No, sir."

"When was your last check-up?"

"Two weeks ago. He always takes me in near the end of the school year."

"Everything okay then? Did your doctor mention any problems?"

"No, sir. He said I was a little thin, but that's all."

"Okay." Dan set the clipboard down and got out a butterfly needle and a couple of vials for blood. "I always do this for first-time patients. They say I'm good at it, that they hardly feel the stick." He wrapped rubber tubing around Billy's bicep. "Make a fist, kiddo." He found the vein, inserted the needle, and released the tubing. "Relax now, just a bit longer."

After drawing and labeling two vials of blood, he led Billy to the radiology room where he took a series of x-rays, and then back to the exam room. "I'm going to start the blood work and develop the film. Will you be all right for a few minutes? Do you want Marty to wait with you?"

"No, he...he wouldn't want to be here."

Dan paused. There was something more going on, something about Marty that was eating at Billy. *Once I'm done with the physical, I'll have to talk with him, find out what's what,* Dan thought.

"Dr. Baxter?"

"What, son?"

"Do you really think Mr. Sheridan can help me?"

"He said he could, and I believe him. He's an excellent lawyer and a good man."

"Okay."

Marty couldn't sit still. He perched on the edge of a leather chair, got up and walked into the hall, and then strode back to the chair. Five minutes later, he was poking his head into the hallway again. "Shit," he muttered as he dropped into the chair. He propped his chin on his hand and stared at his shoes. Something was very wrong with Billy. He'd been through an ordeal so horrifying Marty could barely comprehend it, and it seemed as if there was more, something Billy wasn't saying, something that was shutting him down and cutting him off from Marty.

What Webber had done was hideous, and Marty was certain they'd heard the barest of details. He didn't want to know more. The mere thought of hearing anything worse sickened him. Knowing that friendship might compel him to ask threw a blanket of dread over him that he could feel, so real was its weight. More important than his reluctance, however, was his desire to make Billy feel better. He sensed that his friend needed to talk. He needed someone to listen, someone who wouldn't turn away, who would care for and about him, and tell him it would be all right. Marty searched his heart, wondering whether he could do that. *Can I listen to what Billy says, and be strong for him? I know that whatever I hear won't change how I feel about him, but can I be sure he sees that, and nothing else?* He took a deep breath. "I have to," he said. "Nothing else matters."

Rob made the turn into the parking lot, then drove around the brick and glass structure to the rear of the clinic where he saw Dan's car. Dan hadn't said much over the phone, only that a kid was hurt and he needed Rob's help. It was the first time Dan had called on him, and Rob didn't hesitate. Dan Baxter was more self-contained than anyone Rob had ever met. He was unfailingly calm, quiet, and friendly, and often disturbingly distant. Rob had never heard him raise his voice, and only a rare "damn" or "hell" had passed Dan's lips in Rob's presence. Today he'd sounded like a man teetering between murderous rage and deep sorrow.

Whatever it is you need, Doc, I'll give you all I've got. I just wish you needed more than my legal expertise. He shook his head and sighed.

He parked next to Dan's car, got out, and flipped open his cell phone. Given the circumstances, he knew he shouldn't feel the happy little kick his heart gave at the prospect of seeing Dan, but he did. *Damn, why him?* He punched in Dan's number and waited.

When his father's cell phone rang, Marty glanced at the name on the display, and flipped it open. "Hello, Mr. Sheridan. I'm Martin Baxter. Dad said you'd be here soon. Are you almost here?"

"I'm parked beside your dad's car."

Marty pushed the curtain aside and peered out the office's only window. A broad-shouldered man, wheat-colored hair bright in the summer sun, was standing in the lot. "I'll come let you in through the private entrance." He dropped the cell phone on the desk, unlocked the door and pulled it open.

The attorney crossed the threshold quickly, set a briefcase on the desk, and shook Marty's hand. "Martin, I've heard a lot about you. Where's your dad?"

"Developing x-rays, I think. Have a seat, I'll get him."

He met his father coming out of the lab. "Mr. Sheridan is here. How's Billy?"

Dan walked into his office, nodded at Rob, flipped on the light box, and snapped the x-rays into it. "Haven't had a chance to look at these." He studied them carefully. "Well, at least there are no broken bones."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know, son. One, I haven't done the physical exam yet. Two, I can tell from the way he moves that he's been badly hurt. Three, you know about doctor/patient confidentiality. That's all I can say. Anything else, you'll have to get from Billy."

"I'm sorry. It's just, he's my best friend." Marty dragged his fingers through his hair. "That sounds lame. Billy's special, you know? You want good things for him, but life keeps giving him shit."

"We'll do our best to change that, okay?" Dan turned to Rob and filled him in on the details he hadn't shared over the phone. "Rob, what can we do? Can I legally take him home, keep him away from Webber?"

Sheridan, dressed in faded and frayed jeans, battered leather running shoes, and a tee shirt that clung to his muscular chest and arms, didn't look much like an attorney to Marty, but the gray eyes in the broad face were intelligent and his words were reassuringly professional.

"Yes, if only because he's eighteen. I'll verify the birth certificate, start the paperwork on a petition for guardianship, and have the originals in front of Judge Maylor this evening. I'll get a hearing arranged with the court as quickly as I can. He has a special dislike of abusive parents, so he's the one we want for this. Have you taken any pictures of the young man's injuries?"

Dan shook his head. "No, I just got done with the prep work. Are photos absolutely necessary? He's pretty shook up."

"I know it isn't easy, but if his stepfather tries to block the petition, we may need the ammunition. Why don't we ask Billy? In fact, introduce us, and let me talk to him for a minute, alone. He needs to understand the legal situation."

Dan left Rob with Billy and returned to his office. He sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to him. "Sit down, son. We may have to wait a while."

Marty dropped onto the couch. "You don't have to tell me what he said, but has Billy told you anything else?"

"No, he hasn't, but I get the feeling there's something..."

"Something he isn't talking about that he should?"

Dan nodded. "Exactly."

"Yeah, I thought so. Okay." Marty sighed. "Maybe he'll open up more when we get home."

Rob appeared at the door. "Doc? We're ready for you. Before we go in, you should understand that it is Billy who is my client. I know you're footing the bill here, but he's the one who needs legal representation. You okay with that?"

"Of course. That's the way I assumed it would be."

“Just so we’re clear. He’s agreed to let me take pictures while you determine the extent of his injuries. I couldn’t talk him into calling the police, however. He wouldn’t budge on that. Maybe you can get him to agree. Webber should be sitting in a cell right now, trying to make bail.”

“Think hard on that one. Lloyd Webber is a sergeant with the Welko Police Department. Billy’s convinced they’d close ranks, and I’m not sure I’d care to test the possibility. Or Billy’s nerves.”

“At the house, he said something about his mom.” Marty spoke hesitantly. “That they hadn’t believed her. No, that they hadn’t believed *him*, when his mom...when his mom *what*? What did he mean?”

“Where’s his mother now? Maybe I could talk to her.”

“Only if you’re a medium. She died when Billy was five.” Marty considered for a moment. “Do you think that’s what he was talking about?”

“Shit.” Rob frowned at the carpet. “Sounds like there’s more to this than just what happened yesterday. Okay, I’ll temporarily table the idea of calling the police. I’ll have a friend do some digging, see what creepy-crawlies are hiding under the rocks.” He pulled a digital camera from his briefcase. “Let’s get this done. He’s exhausted.”

Twenty minutes later, his face white and hands shaking, Rob switched off the camera. “I’ll be outside, Doc.”

Dan helped Billy dress, supported the boy down the hall to a chair in his office, and stepped outside. Rob was on the phone, pacing back and forth by his car. Dan leaned against the wall, watching Rob. The blond’s hair gleamed bright under the desert sun. The pale blue tee shirt he wore clung to his chest and arms, revealing the hard, sculpted muscles that lay under the lightly tanned skin. His broad face, normally cheerful and open, was tight with intensity. Dan felt a familiar quiver in his stomach. His heart sped up and his fingers twitched with a desire to touch, to caress. He took a deep breath and ruthlessly quelled those feelings. *This isn’t the time*. He sighed. *It never is*.

Rob closed his cell phone and tucked it in his pocket. Dan stared at his shoes. “I haven’t seen anything this bad involving a teenager since my days on emergency room rotation in Salt Lake. Guess thirty miles isn’t far enough away from the big city.” He rubbed a hand over his face.

“I didn’t realize... This wasn’t just a beating, Doc. That would have been bad enough, but this... Shit. I’ve seen it before, but you never get used to it. If Billy were a minor, he’d be put in foster care or a group home, but child care services around here aren’t real swift about keeping up with how the kids are treated. Some foster parents are as bad as Billy’s dad, and the group homes are crowded with bullies and gangster wannabes. The solution is usually as bad as the problem. More and more lately, I wonder why I stay in my job. At least this time, the kid has a shot at something better.” He paced back and forth. “I’ve made some arrangements for Billy’s safety. You’re going to have a hefty bill before this is all concluded. If it gets too pricey, I’ll waive my fee.” Rob tilted his head back and stared up at the sky. “Could wish for a drink, but nothing’s gonna help, except making things right for that kid.” Rob’s mouth thinned. “Although stringing Webber up by his balls would rank a close second.”

Dan shoved his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the building. “So, what’s next?”

Marty perched on the edge of his dad’s desk, looking at Billy. He was huddled in a corner of the leather sofa, not saying anything. The baggy tee shirt he wore had slipped down, revealing four closely spaced bruises on the back of one thin shoulder. *Webber’s fingers did that*.

Marty was certain there were more, probably worse marks hidden under the clothing.

That was enough to make him feel like crying for his friend. The fact that Billy had said nothing to him since they’d left the house, wouldn’t even look at him, was a hurt Marty hadn’t expected. He’d tried to talk to him, but couldn’t find a way through the wall Billy had erected.

He crouched in front of Billy, and it happened again. The blue eyes slid away and he seemed to shrink into himself.

"What's wrong? This is bad enough, I know, but there's something more. You won't even look at me."

"I can't tell you," Billy whispered. "You'll...you'll think I'm sick. You wouldn't want to...to be my friend."

"Not gonna happen. Whatever it is, it won't change anything between us."

"This would."

Marty stared at the carpet, thinking hard. How could he get through to Billy? What should he say? At last he looked up. "We've been friends for seven years. Do you think I'm a wuss?"

Billy's head jerked up. "What? N-no, it isn't—"

"Do you think I'm some jerk who doesn't stand by his friends? Do I strike you as a total shithead?"

The blue eyes were now wide and shocked. "No, that isn't what I meant!"

"At least you're looking at me. You don't have to tell me anything unless you want to, but don't avoid me, okay? We've been friends too long for that."

"I'm sorry—"

"You don't have to apologize." Marty touched Billy's arm lightly, using only his fingertips, ready to withdraw them instantly if Billy flinched away. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty; I'm trying to make you understand. Nothing he's done changes how I feel. You're still you, and you're my friend." He took a deep breath. "If this had happened to me, I'd probably crawl into a closet and never want to come out. It's all right if you don't want to talk, but don't hide from me, okay?"

"Okay." A poor imitation of a smile briefly lifted Billy's lips. "I'm glad you're my friend."

Marty sat down beside him. "Count on it."

The door opened and the two men came back into the office. Rob stood by the door and Marty's father propped one hip on the edge of the desk. "Billy, Rob can explain it later, but basically, you can stay with us as long as you like. No problem. If you want, I can become your legal guardian. Would you like that?"

"Stay with you and Marty? As much as I'd like that, my dad won't let me. He'll stop you, somehow, and I'll end up back with him. I wish I were braver, but I can't tell the police. It wouldn't do any good, anyway. Nothing would change." His shoulders drooped. "I don't know what to do."

Rob spoke up. "Trust me, okay? I'm good at what I do, and there are more laws designed to protect you than to help your stepfather. You can stay with Dr. Baxter."

Billy stared at the attorney, doubt and hope in his blue eyes, then turned to his friend's dad. "Dr. Baxter, are you sure you want to do this? He's real good at bringing trouble to others. He lives for it."

"That won't make me lose any sleep. Yeah, kiddo, I'm sure. Come on, let's get out of here."