

Chapter One

The Torture Room

Suddenly I woke up, strapped to a chair.

‘What . . . ?’ I whispered.

Dazed, I looked around me. I was in a room with a concrete floor and cinderblock walls. A single bare lightbulb hung glaring from a wire above me. Against the wall across from me there was a set of white metal drawers. A tray was attached to it. There were instruments on the tray – awful instruments – blades and pincers and something that looked like a miniature version of those acetylene torches welders use. The instruments lay on a white cloth. The cloth was stained with blood.

The sight of the blood jolted me into full consciousness. I tried to move my arms and legs. I couldn’t. That’s when I saw the straps. One on each wrist, holding me to the chair’s metal arms. One on each ankle, holding me to its metal legs. And there was blood here too. More blood. On the floor at my feet. On my white shirt, on my black slacks, on my arms.

And there were bruises on my arms, dark purple bruises. And there were oozing burn marks on the backs of my hands.

I hurt. I kind of just realised it all at once. My whole body ached and stung inside and out. My shirt was soaking wet. My skin felt clammy with sweat. My mouth tasted like dirt. I smelled like garbage.

Have you ever had a nightmare, a really bad one, where you wake up and you can feel your heart hammering against the bed and you can't catch your breath? Then, as you start to understand that the nightmare wasn't real, that it was all a dream, your heart slows down again and your breathing gets deeper and you relax and think, *Whew, that sure seemed real.*

Well, this was exactly the opposite. I opened my eyes expecting to see my bedroom at home, my black-belt certificate, my trophies, my poster of *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead, I was in what should have been a nightmare, but wasn't. It was real. And with every second, my heart beat harder. My breath came shorter. Panic flared up in me like a living flame.

Where was I? Where was my room? Where were my parents? What was happening to me? How did I get here?

Terrified, I racked my brain, trying to think, trying to figure it out, asking myself in the depths of my confusion and fear: what was the last thing I remembered . . . ?

Chapter Two

An Ordinary Day

An ordinary day. That's it. An ordinary September day. That's all there was before the insanity began.

That night – that last night – I was in my room, working on my homework as usual. I had a history paper due. ‘What is the Best Form of Government?’ A classic Mr Sherman assignment. Mr Sherman liked to pretend he was some kind of radical. He wanted us to question our assumptions, and think outside the box. It never seemed to occur to him that sometimes the simple, most obvious answer might be the right one. ‘What is the Best Form of Government?’ I wanted to call my paper ‘Constitutional Democracy, You Doofus, What Do You Think?’ But somehow I figured that might not be the best way to get a good grade.

So as ten o'clock rolled around, I was sitting at my computer, working on my arguments. About how people had the right to be free and choose their own leaders. About how leaders who thought they should be in charge no matter

what, who thought they had all the answers or some super-duper system that was going to make things fair and perfect for everyone – people like kings and dictators and Communists – always wound up messing their countries up in the end, telling everyone what to say and do and murdering the people who didn't fit in with the way they wanted to run things.

It was hard work – and it didn't help that, at the same time I was polishing my deathless prose, I had Josh Lerner – GalaxyMaster, as he calls himself online – on the Instant Messenger. GalaxyMaster was watching an ancient episode of *Star Trek* on YouTube and sending me a message every time something cool or stupid happened. Which was, like, every two seconds. And which I could see for myself anyway because I had the same episode running on the upper right-hand corner of my computer, even though I'd turned the sound down low so I could listen to George Strait piping out of my iPod dock.

GalaxyMaster: look at that rock! soooooo paper-machier!

BBeltl: i know josh. im watching it.

GalaxyMaster: Ooooo its so heavy. i cant lift it. roflmayo!

BBeltl: josh I can c it.

GalaxyMaster: that klingon mask is so fake!

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GalaxyMaster could be kind of a dork sometimes. Plus he was making it tough for me to hold up my end of the conversation with Rick Donnelly, who was on my headset. I'd called him to tell him about the argument I'd had that evening with Alex Hauser, but then we'd gotten to talking about the history paper. Rick had Sherman for history too, and he was totally aware of Sherman's high level of doofy-osity. But Rick was the kind of guy who was always trying to play the angles, always trying to figure out what the teacher wanted to hear. His paper made the argument that Communism was theoretically the best form of government, but it just hadn't been done right yet.

'That's nuts,' I told him. 'They ought to have a sign outside those countries like at McDonald's or something: "Communism: Over 100 Million Murdered".'

'Hey,' said Rick. 'All I know is that with Sherman, radicalism is where the A's are. Follow the grades, my son. Follow the grades.'

I laughed and shook my head and went on writing about the joys of liberty.

So that, basically, was me – just before ten on an ordinary Wednesday night in September. Writing my paper and IM'ing with Josh and talking with Rick and watching YouTube and listening to tunes on my iPod dock – and starting to fade out after a long, long day.

Then the clock in the living room downstairs chimed the hour. I could hear it through the floor. And about a

nanosecond later, my mother – with a predictability that sometimes made me wonder if she was really some kind of automated device – called from the bottom of the stairs:

‘Charlie. Ten o’clock. Time to get ready for bed.’

I sighed. To my shame, I had the earliest school-night bedtime of any just-turned-seventeen-year-old I knew and, except in dire circumstances, it was non-negotiable.

‘Hey, I gotta shut down,’ I said to Rick.

‘You’re such a wuss.’

‘You’re a Commie.’

‘If it’ll get me into college.’

‘See you in the a.m.’ I clicked off and typed into my IM:

BBeltl: g2g.

GalaxyMaster: wuss.

BBeltl:nerd.

GalaxyMaster: cya.

BBeltl: bye!

Then I saved my paper into Sherman’s online homework file and shut down the computer.

Ten minutes later, I was lying in bed, paging through the latest issue of *Black Belt* magazine.

Five minutes after that, I laid the magazine on my bedside table. I reached up for the switch of the reading lamp set in the wall above me. My eyes went around the room one last time, from the computer to the tournament trophies on my

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shelves to the black-belt certificate framed on my wall to the movie poster of *The Lord of the Rings*. Finally, I looked at the back of my hand. There was a number written on it in black marker. That made me smile to myself.

Then I snapped the light off. I said a quick good-night prayer.

In sixty seconds, I was sound asleep.

Chapter Three

'Kill Him!'

Then, all at once, I woke up. There, in that bare, terrible room. Strapped to that chair. Hurt and helpless. With the awful instruments on the tray winking and glinting in the light from the single bare bulb dangling above.

How had it happened? Had I been kidnapped from my bed? Why? Who would've taken me? Who would want to hurt me? I was just a regular kid.

In my first panic I struggled wildly, trying to break free of the straps. It was no good. They were made of some kind of canvas, strong. And the chair was bolted to the floor. I couldn't budge it. I thrashed and pulled, trying to rip myself out of the chair or to rip the chair out of the floor by main strength. Finally I slumped, out of breath, exhausted.

The next moment, I heard voices. I tensed. I lifted my head, held still, listened. They were men's voices, murmuring, right outside the room, right outside the metal door.

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My first instinct was to shout to them, to scream for help. But something stopped me. If I was here, someone had put me here. If I was hurt, someone had hurt me. Someone had strapped me in this chair. Someone had used those instruments on my flesh. The odds that the men outside that door were my friends seemed very slim.

So I kept my mouth shut. I listened to the low voices, straining with all my might to make out what they were saying over the pounding of my own pulse.

‘ . . . Homelander One,’ said one voice.

A second voice said something I couldn’t hear.

Then the first voice said, ‘We’ll never get another shot at Yarrow.’

When the second voice answered, I could only make out part of it: ‘ . . . two more days . . . can send Orton . . . knows the bridge as well as West.’

West. That was me. Charlie West. What were they talking about? What bridge? I didn’t know any bridge.

The flame of panic roared through me again. Without thinking, I renewed my struggles. Trying to pull my arms up, trying to wrestle my body free, trying to tilt the chair one way or the other. Useless, all of it.

Tears came into my eyes – tears of terror and frustration. This couldn’t be happening. It didn’t make any sense. Where were my mom and dad? Where was my life? Where was everything? It had to be a nightmare. It had to be.

Now there were footsteps in the hall outside. Someone new was approaching.

‘Here’s Waylon,’ the second voice said.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. The first voice spoke again, louder this time, clearer, more formal than before. It was the voice of a man speaking to his superior. It was easier for me to make out the words.

‘You reach Prince?’ the voice said.

A new voice answered – the voice of authority. Waylon. It sounded like an American name, but the voice had a thick foreign accent of some kind.

‘I reached him. I told him everything.’

‘We did exactly what he said. Exactly what he told us,’ the first voice went on. I could hear his fear, his fear of what Prince might do to him if he failed.

‘The kid may be telling the truth. You have to consider that,’ said the second voice. I could tell he was frightened too.

Waylon answered them with a voice that was ironic and smooth. He was enjoying their fear. I could hear it. ‘Don’t worry. Prince understands. He doesn’t hold you responsible. But whatever the truth is, the West boy is useless to us now.’

I was straining so hard to hear that my body had gone rigid, my head leaning toward the door, my neck stretched out, my hands pulling hard against the straps.

But for another second or two, there was nothing. Only

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the silence and my trembling breath, my wildly beating heart.

Then in the same smooth, cool, ironic voice, Waylon said softly:

‘Kill him.’