

Prologue

The rain cascaded down from the dark sky, splashing in waves over his windshield. His wiper blades couldn't keep up with the sudden downpour, and Kyle was half tempted to drive with his head sticking out of the window. Maybe then he'd actually be able to see something. Like the road, for instance.

Rap music blared from the speakers. The entire car thumped to the bass line thanks to new, Kevlar Fiber subwoofers in the trunk. Those things were literally bullet proof, so they could hand a ridiculous decibel level. Normally he enjoyed the feeling of his entire body vibrating in time with the beat, but tonight he turned the music off. The storm had him on edge, and another distraction could easily send him careening off the road and into the rocky Pacific. Kyle was a devoted acolyte of the safety-first philosophy, which is probably why he was one of the few Riverside Prep juniors that hadn't wrapped a Porsche around a tree yet.

After several more turns through tree lined streets and a scary moment of hydroplaning, he mercifully made his last turn. He slowed the car and rolled down the window, swiping a stolen keyfob over the tiny black keypad embedded into the stone pillar of the front gate. He couldn't hear the beep over the storm, but the impressive metal barrier began to swing open at an excruciatingly slow pace. He rolled his window back up quickly, wiping away offensive raindrops from the jet black leather interior, and passed through the gate. The pavement meandered over several hills, the trees turning to an impenetrable wall the further he drove. When his destination

came into view, he let out a low whistle. Even after all this time, the sight was still impressive.

The house, set on the crest of a hill, was a mega-mansion. That was really the only accurate way to describe it. The estate sprawled out over acres and acres of forest, the land untouched and pristine. The house, a twenty-five thousand square foot monstrosity, was the only discernable evidence of humans for miles. A mecca of modernism surrounded by the wildness of nature. Instead of the traditional stone architecture typically found on grand estates, this house followed the west coast trend of ultra-modern, high-tech, and borderline sci-fi.

The residence was predominantly constructed of glass and concrete, with accents of reclaimed wood strategically placed to keep the house from channeling an office park. The house was completely dark. Odd, given the relatively early hour. He pulled up to the front door, ignoring the parking spaces clearly meant for visitors. He turned off the car and blew out a sigh of relief.

He was home.

He popped the trunk then shoved the keys in his pocket. He wondered how long it had taken his twin, Jared, to realize his keyfob to the house was missing. Kyle had misplaced his own the day before football camp, and had “borrowed” Jared’s out of desperation. Jared had probably been annoyed for the entire two weeks of camp and would most likely pounce the moment Kyle walked in the door.

He took a deep breath, bracing for the coming onslaught of water, and hopped out of the car. He sprinted to the trunk, grabbed

his duffle bag and football pads, and made a beeline for the front door. He swiped the keyfob again at the keyless entry, and the massive glass door popped open.

He kicked off his shoes in the entryway and shook out his blond hair, sending droplets of water spraying in every direction. His mom would make him clean it up, but he didn't care. First priority was warming up. Cleaning he could deal with later. He dropped his football gear and duffle on the stone tile floor next to the door and turned on the light in the entryway.

"Hey, I'm back!" he called into the darkness past the entry. His voice echoed through the house. He waited for a response, for some sign of movement, but none came. Weird.

Could his family have gone out? His parents knew he'd be back tonight, but maybe a pizza craving had struck. He slid his phone from his pocket, hoping for a text or missed call. Nothing.

His stomach was starting to clench, an odd feeling creeping through him. Unease. They wouldn't have just bailed on him without a word. He dialed his mom's cell, willing himself to calm down. It was fine. Everything was fine. She would answer with some harebrained story about needing ice cream. A noise erupted from the darkness beyond, and Kyle jumped in terror. Then, he recognized the noise.

His mom's ringtone.

He took a sharp intake of breath. He walked further into the house, searching for the light switch on the wall. As he rounded the

corner into the great room, his fingers found success. He flipped on the lights, bracing himself.

It took three seconds for his mind to make sense of his surroundings.

It took four seconds for him to scream.

It took five seconds for his world to end.

1.

“Leave me alone, man,” Marcus whined, rubbing the pain from his upper-arm. “Doesn’t this ever get old to you guys?”

Rick snorted, looking down his nose at the noticeably shorter boy. “Nah, never. Your face is hilarious every single time!” Rick pulled up on the locker handle, yanking it to get it unstuck. Josh grabbed Marcus’s arm even harder and started shoving him back towards the yellow locker.

Marcus’s voice jumped an octave. “Seriously, guys, be reasonable. Who’s gonna help you with the Lit Review assignment if I’m stuck in a locker all day today? Maybe you should think this through.” He tried to brace himself against the outside of the locker, but his spindly limbs gave way like a toothpick dam.

Rick scoffed. “We have other nerds for that. Lucky you, you’re off the hook today. So really, you should be thanking us.” He placed his hand on Marcus’s sweaty forehead and shoved downward a few inches, forcing Marcus’s head below the top shelf. His head banged loudly against the metal shelf before Marcus involuntarily lowered it to avoid more severe pain.

Kyle winced as he watched from twenty feet away, partially hidden behind a corner. Yikes, that had to have hurt. He checked behind him, confirming that the hallways on all sides were deserted. He inwardly praised the stingy tightwads on the schoolboard for refusing to install security cameras at Halstrom. He was in the clear. His heart raced. He couldn’t believe he was actually going to do this.

He was gonna save that kid. His first mission. A small step, sure, but at the same time a gigantic one. He waited a few moments longer, watching silently for an opening.

Marcus twisted and turned, trying desperately to escape the confines of the tiny locker, but no dice. Josh grabbed the locker door, attempting to swing it shut. Kyle darted forward and grabbed the door, holding it open.

“Problem, gentlemen?” he asked casually, deepening his voice artificially. Deep voices were much scarier, right? Maybe he needed to get one of those voice modulator things. He leaned against the yellow bank of lockers, just another breezy conversation in the hallway. He wore a ski mask and was covered head to toe in black.

“What the...?” Josh stuttered, staring at the masked figure. He didn’t have time to finish the sentence. Kyle punched him squarely in the nose, and Josh dropped to the floor in a heap. Kyle didn’t bother glancing at the Josh. Instead he turned his focus to his next target.

“Dude, what’s your problem?” Rick asked, backing away from the bank of lockers slowly and raising his hands defensively. Rick was a big guy, maybe as tall as Kyle, but he was flabby and slow. Definitely manageable.

Kyle laughed. “My problem? Let’s talk about *your* problems. What sort of daddy issues are you taking out on poor Marcus here?” He paused to help Marcus out of the locker. Marcus stumbled out, staring at Kyle in shock. Kyle caught Marcus by the arm, preventing an embarrassing fall, then turned back to Rick. “My

advice? Next time, see a therapist. Got it?” He stalked towards Rick, taking two steps forward for every one of Rick’s backward steps.

“Ok...ok. It won’t happen again.” Rick turned and sprinted away. Kyle watched him retreat, a feeling of pride swelling within him. First time out, and he’d totally owned those jerks. He heard a groan, then saw a frightened Josh streak past him. Josh had a hand to his nose, trying unsuccessfully to staunch the evidence of Kyle’s punch flowing down his face.

Kyle’s adrenaline was pumping, fire roaring through his veins. It had been easy. Fun even. He smiled as he watched the two bullies round the corner at full speed. Serves them right. Freaking jerks.

“Who are you?” came an awed voice from behind. Kyle spun back around. In the euphoria of a successful mission, he’d totally forgotten about the victim. Marcus was picking up his textbooks and pencils scattered on the floor. The strap on his backpack was busted, and Marcus tried to gather everything up with overflowing arms. His books just tumbled back to the floor.

Kyle waited for Marcus to glance down at the new mess, then sprinted around the corner.

“Wait,” Marcus shouted, but the hallway was already deserted.

Kyle heard Marcus stand up. Crap. Kyle hadn’t thought of an escape plan. He chastised himself as he passed a few doors. A stupid mistake. He took a chance and ducked into a classroom,

praying to any god willing to listen that the room would be unoccupied.

He huffed in relief. Empty, and the blinds were even closed on the windows for good measure. He'd lucked into the perfect spot.

Kyle heard Marcus coming towards his hiding place, and he sidled up right against the wall, out of the line of sight of the window. There wasn't a need, though. Marcus continued walking past the classroom, rushing down the hallway and calling out frantically for his savior.

Kyle watched out the small window as Marcus disappeared further down the hall. Smiling, he reached up and pulled off the black ski mask, relishing the burst of cool air on his face. Dang, those masks were hot and itchy. He made a mental note to look into alternative headwear that night. He ripped off the black breakaway pants, revealing his normal, worn jeans. He stuffed the pants into his backpack with the mask. He shook out of his black hoodie and turned it inside out, returning the sweatshirt to its normal non-descript gray.

Transformation into boring high school student complete. After replacing the hoodie, he softly opened the door and scanned the hallway.

He was in the clear.

He slid through the door and started walking towards his locker, opposite the way Marcus had gone. He stuck his hands in his pockets, pushed his ear buds into place, and lowered his eyes to the floor. Nonthreatening. Unengaged. Uncaring. His beat up Converse

sneakers squeaked against the linoleum as he shuffled his feet, and he left more than a few scuffmarks in his wake.

“Mr. Robertson, I trust you have a reason for loitering in the halls so late?”

He almost froze. Had someone seen him save Marcus? Would this whole thing be over before it even really started? Kyle ignored the voice and kept up his slow progress down the hall. He was supposed to be absorbed in his music after all, and had to keep up appearances.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and spun around wildly, faking a startle. Principal Thompson stood behind him, her arms crossed and her beady eyes glaring from behind thick-rimmed glasses. Even though she was merely five feet tall, Kyle still felt like the tiny woman towered over him. She had a huge personality that dwarfed everything around her. Probably why she could handle being a high school principal. He plucked the ear buds from his ears, feigning embarrassment.

“Did you say something? Sorry, I guess I didn’t hear.” Kyle lowered his head further, scrunching up his shoulders for good measure. *Look weak* he reminded himself. *Look insecure*.

Principal Thompson sighed. “I asked what you were doing here so late. All the busses have left for the day. Did you need a ride home?”

Kyle shook his head. “Nah, I lost my phone earlier. Just found it. And I’m walking home, thanks.”

Principal Thompson nodded. “Fine. You’d better get on home, then. You don’t want your grandmother to worry.”

His heart clenched at her words, but Kyle kept his voice even as he responded, “Ok. Will do.” Kyle turned, reaching for his ear buds again and turning back towards his locker.

“And Kyle,” Principal Thompson called out. “Try to keep yourself out of trouble the rest of the week. We don’t need another trip to detention, alright?”

Kyle didn’t bother turning around, but did raise his hand in a wave to at least acknowledge her request. It was the polite thing to do. He heard her sigh, and he felt a twinge of guilt. He shoved that deep down, though.

He’d made peace with the persona he’d created. He had to be ok with people thinking he was a total screw-up for his plan to work. He reached his locker, grabbed a few textbooks, and checked the time. He was almost an hour late. Hopefully Grandma wouldn’t be freaking out. He shot her a quick text and slid the phone back into his pocket.

He made his way towards the nearest exit, backtracking a bit. Most of the hallways were empty, but occasionally he passed a few people. A guy late to football practice was running through the halls in his cleats and helmet. A few theatre nerds were hanging up posters for the upcoming musical.

He didn’t slow as he passed Josh and Rick. Josh was slumped on the floor against a locker, holding a wad of toilet paper to his nose. Blood covered the front of his blue polo shirt. Kyle

almost felt bad. Then he remembered how many bruises he'd seen on Marcus since school started.

"He just came out of nowhere, you know?" Josh whined. Rick stood a few feet away, glancing down the hall. He tensed when he saw Kyle, but relaxed as recognition came. Dismissing Kyle as a threat, Rick turned back to Josh, shaking his head.

"Whoever he is, he better watch his back. Let's see how he does next time when he doesn't take you out with a cheap shot."

Kyle snorted quietly. Cheap shot? Whatever. The hit was totally clean. It wasn't like he'd landed a kick to the groin or anything. Even for bullies, Kyle had standards.

"Yeah, he won't get the drop on me again, whoever that psycho freak is," Josh agreed.

Kyle slumped past them, keeping his eyes on the ground a few feet in front of him. He soon heard their muttering fade away as he turned the last corner. He smiled, his victory flooding through him again. He couldn't believe he'd scared two guys off. Success soared through his chest. Finally, in the privacy of an empty hallway, he celebrated. Kyle leapt into the air, slamming a locker with his palm on his way down.

"Jeeze, anger issues?"

Kyle nearly fell over. He spun in a haphazard circle like a total idiot, trying to find the owner of the voice.

Cassie Lopez stood ten feet away, her fraying messenger bag slung across her chest, a perfectly manicured hand resting on her

hip. Kyle fought the blush forming on his face. Perfect. How had he not noticed her before? He took his ear buds out again, stuffing them quickly into his hoodie pocket.

“Sorry. Really good song,” he explained, shrugging his shoulders. He tried not to ogle her, which was difficult for any male teenager who saw Cassie. She was wearing jeans and a plain white t-shirt. Boring on most people, but on her? Traffic stopping.

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Next time you want to jam out in public, how about you keep it inside instead. Ok? Deep inside.”

Kyle shrugged, a smirk on his face. “What can I say? When I feel the music, it can’t be stopped.”

Cassie strutted by him, her long brown hair swishing with each step. “Yeah ok.” Kyle smiled as she past, until he heard her say under her breath, “Weirdo.”

She hadn’t meant him to hear it, Kyle was certain. It was more like an afterthought than a dig. Still, the word hurt more than he would’ve expected.

“Air head,” he muttered back malevolently. She paused, and he spun on his heel and took off toward the exit.

“Excuse me?” she demanded, but Kyle didn’t stop to apologize. It wasn’t true. Cassie was a smart girl, but her good looks gave her a reputation for being dumb just the same. Sure, it was a jerk move to capitalize on one of her insecurities, but turnabout was supposed to be fair play.

He put his ear buds back in, and jumped one more time, slamming into a locker hard with his whole body and making as much noise as possible. He heard her huff in a rage, but he didn't slow. He pushed hard on the metal double doors, hitting the window to a few fake beats for good measure and rushed out of the school.

Fifteen minutes later, Kyle unlocked the three deadbolts on the front door and shuffled into the house.

"Grandma, I'm home!" he called out, dropping his backpack by the front door and kicking off his tennis shoes. He glanced around the sitting room. The scene was still a bit of a shock each time he opened the front door. It was so different from his old house. The couch facing the front window was old, huge, and a weird floral green pattern. Two sitting chairs flanked the couch, both some hideous color that Kyle was pretty sure was called mauve. The old coffee table groaned under the weight of Grandma's piles of knitting and quilting books. Kyle made a point not to look at the giant family portrait hanging above the couch.

He realized he hadn't gotten a response. His heartbeat shot up immediately, rising to a frantic pace. He crept through the sitting room with fists clenched. He walked down the darkened hallway. As he got closer to the kitchen, he began to hear faint noises. His stomach unclench. He peeked around the corner, and smiled in relief.

"Grandma," he called again, suddenly feeling ridiculous for his reaction. Someday he'd be able to walk into a quiet house again without totally losing it.

The old woman ignored him, swaying gently on the spot and reading the battered cookbook laying on the counter. She had a

smear of flour across her face and covering her wrinkled hands, and her apron knot was coming untied.

He cupped his mouth with his hands, focusing the volume of his voice even more. “Grandma!” he shouted.

She jumped and let out a shriek, the rolling pin in her hand flying into the air. As the wooden pin clattered to the ground, Grandma started laughing, holding her hand to her chest.

“Dear me! You about gave me a heart attack!” she said loudly. She reached up and removed the giant blue headphones that had been covering her ears. As she slid them off, Kyle heard the distinct rhythm of jazz music emanating from the Beats headphones.

Kyle laughed. “Sorry, Grandma. You do realize you could play your music on the stereo, right?” He nodded towards the old cd player on the counter next to the fridge. “That way you could hear what’s happening around you too. Just an idea.”

Grandma scoffed. “You got me these lovely noise cancelling headphones for Christmas, and I’m going to use them! I get a lot more done when I’m not distracted by things anyway.” She gestured haphazardly around the kitchen. Kyle glanced around and shook his head. The kitchen was tiny and sparse, just like the rest of the house. There wasn’t a whole lot to be distracted by.

“How was school today?” Grandma asked, changing the subject. Kyle walked over and picked up the fallen rolling pin, while Grandma found her place in the recipe she’d been reading.

Kyle shrugged. “Fine. I lost my phone and had to go back and find it. Sorry I’m late.” He rinsed the rolling pin off in the sink

and dried it, then went back to clean up the flour sprinkled all over the wooden floor.

“Thank you, dear,” Grandma mumbled, squinting intently at the cookbook. Grandma always got that look when she was thinking particularly hard.

“Trying to do math?” Kyle asked.

Grandma nodded solemnly. “Trying to do a third of the recipe. I need to get us one of those ‘cooking for two’ cookbooks. Anyway, tell me more about school. Have you made any friends yet?”

Kyle shrugged, noncommittal. “A few.” He didn’t offer any other details. The truth was, no, he hadn’t made friends. But how could he explain that to Grandma? She would know right away something was up. You didn’t go from Prom King and football captain at your old school to weirdo loser loner kid without a good reason, and fessing up to his grandma was the last thing he was going to do.

“That’s great, honey,” Grandma said. She threw more flour onto the counter and started rolling out piecrust, humming the melody from the jazz album she’d been listening to.

“Chicken pot pie?” Kyle asked hopefully.

Grandma nodded. “You know, you can always bring your new friends over. If you’d like. I know this house is a lot smaller than you’re used to....” She dropped off the sentence, looking a little embarrassed.

Kyle put his arm around his grandma and pulled her in for a quick hug. “I love your house,” he reassured her. “And thanks. When I know people well enough to hang out, I’ll definitely have them over.”

Grandma nodded, still looking unconvinced, and went back to rolling out dough. “Ok, ok. I’ll stop bothering you about making friends. Now get out of my kitchen and get started on your homework. We both have work to do, young man.”

Kyle released her and saluted stoically. “Yes ma’am,” he said, retreating away from the kitchen. He retrieved his backpack by the front door and slinked off to his room. Once inside, he switched on the stereo to his favorite alt-rock station and laid back on the bed. He pulled out his phone and sighed.

Three missed calls, six text messages, four snapchats.

He deleted everything without reading it. He grabbed his sketchbook from the nightstand and went to work designing a better, and less itchy, mask.