

Chapter One

Mason and I had been talking about leaving for a long time. But that's all it was. Just talk. And it was mostly him doing the talking. Finally, though, he convinced me to do it. Get up early, real early, while it was still dark. Steal a car from a driveway down the street. He said he knew of a guy who always left his key in his beat-up Honda Civic. It would be easy. We'd be out of here and gone.

So one day we just did it. It actually was as easy as that. We didn't even pack anything. I did whatever Mason told me to do. I met him at the street corner at 4:00 a.m. We walked up to the driveway and got into the car. He showed me the key that was under the floor mat, stuck it in the ignition and started it right up. Then we backed out of the driveway and headed down the road. Just like that. It felt like a dream.

But it all went downhill from there.

Mason was so confident about stealing that old beater that I didn't even question him. But he forgot one important thing—making sure it had enough gas in the tank to get us to the city.

Did I mention that the sun wasn't up yet? It was still dark when the car conked out on the highway. "Maybe we should forget about it," I told Mason. "Let's hitchhike back home and hope we can get a ride before anyone even knows we're

gone. Let's leave the damn car. Nobody will even know it was us that stole it."

"Don't be stupid. We've been talking about this for a long time. You want to crawl back home with our tails between our legs?"

"I just have a bad feeling about this," I said.

"Don't be a shit. If you want to go home, go. We got this far and I'm sticking with the plan. I'm done with all those assholes back there. And I'm not going back home to take more crap from my father."

It was true. We both hated that town. And although my father wasn't as mean as Mason's, he'd been on my case ever since I could remember.

But here we were, stuck in a stolen car on the side of the road in the dark. We had absolutely no plan for what to do next.

Chapter Two

It wasn't the first time I'd followed Mason into trouble. But it was the worst. And stupidest. I had always trusted him, and I didn't know why. Maybe because he was like an older brother to me, and sometimes he could play that role well. He'd been out of school for a year now, even though he hadn't graduated. I still had a year to go. When the last day before summer vacation came around, I really

was happy to walk out the door. And I wasn't sure I wanted to go back. I hated school, so why bother?

I knew my parents would fight me the whole way about not graduating. I didn't exactly have a happy home life. Sure, it was a bit better than Mason's, but not by much. My mother and father fought a lot. They were so different from each other and seemed to disagree about everything. My mom had never moved more than a mile away from where she'd grown up. My father had been born here too, but he was the son of an immigrant—my crazy grandfather didn't speak a word of English. My dad grew up with kids making fun of his accent, even though he did his best to cover up anything about his family or past. His advice to me was always "Keep your head down. Don't cause trouble or bring attention to yourself. And don't screw up your life."

He shouted a lot when he said stuff like that to me, but he never hit me. Not like Mason's old fart of a father. But I definitely didn't want to have to

face either of my parents about quitting school. And I sure wasn't going to tell them I was leaving this town for good. With Mason.



Mason had convinced me it would be easy enough to steal that car and make a run for it. Down the highway to the city and then maybe beyond. As we sat there in the dark car, I had to admit that, scary as this whole thing was, I didn't want to go back.

"Let's just leave the car then. Let's walk," I said.

He didn't like that suggestion. In fact, he usually didn't much like anything I said. "I'm the ideas man, Tyler," he said. "We need our own set of wheels and that's that."

Which was bullshit. Because here we were, at the very beginning of the big escape that was supposed to go off without a hitch. But the car was dead. And like an idiot, Mason kept grinding away at the ignition. "Look, man," I said, "we're out of

gas. The car isn't going to start." He kept cranking away anyway until the battery went dead. Then he slammed a fist into the steering wheel like it was the car's fault.

"What now?" I asked.

Mason turned to me, a sneer on his face. "This wouldn't have happened if I had been on my own. I'd have been gone long ago. But it took so frigging long to convince you. So I waited it out. And now look where we are."

I knew how Mason's mind worked. He liked to blame me for whatever screwed-up thing happened to us. And there were a lot of screwed-up things in our history. I knew this wasn't my fault, except for the part where I'd just followed him blindly, believing he knew what he was doing. I could have said a lot of things right then. But I kept my damn mouth shut.

Chapter Three

Just when I thought we were totally screwed, it got worse. Mason got out of the car and started kicking at the door. He'd always had a bad temper and a nasty habit of bashing at things that made him mad. And he got mad a lot.

He screamed out loud. Once. Twice. Three times. I kept telling him to get back in the car so we could think this through.

"No, you idiot! You get out of the car!" Mason shouted.

And I should have gotten out of the car right then and started walking back home. If I was lucky, I could get back before anyone even knew I was gone. But Mason was acting like a maniac. I didn't trust him. He was sure to start taking his anger out on me. So I reached over and locked the driver's door. Then my door.

This infuriated him. "Get out of the damn car, Tyler," he snarled. But I sat tight.

And then Mason did that thing, that reversal he did in every damn jam we'd ever gotten ourselves into.

He laughed.

He put his mug up to the car window and made a goofy face. "Shit," he said, the anger seeping out of him. "We're finally on our way, dude."

"Barely," I said. "Just barely."

"So the car's dead. So what?" He had done his classic about-face. The whole bloody fiasco was

now a joke. "Come on. Let's walk. Let's torch the car. Just watch it burn."

"No. Don't be stupid."

And he would do it too. He'd pull that lighter out of his pocket and set the car on fire. So I did the only thing I could. I opened my door and got out. I walked around to his side of the car. Sure enough, right then he took out his lighter and flicked it on. The flame lit up his face, making him look like... what? A ghost? A devil?

"Put that away," I insisted. "All it will do is attract attention. Bring cops."

He flicked the lighter closed. "Guess you're right. Let's get out of here." And then Mason just shrugged.

So we started walking. It was cold, and we weren't dressed for the weather. What was the plan now? Neither of us said a word. Right then I wanted to be anywhere but here. With anyone but him.

I didn't know what was going through his mind, only that he was looking for someone to blame, and out here there was only me. I was the only one to pin it on. "You really fucked this up, Tyler. You really did it this time."

"How did I fuck it up? You were the one who didn't check the gas."

"I waited for you, buddy. I've been waiting for months. I waited until you were ready to leave. I would have left a long time ago. But I hung in there for you."

This wasn't exactly true. We'd talked about leaving, but it was Mason who'd always talked us out of it. I think deep down he was scared to do it on his own and needed me as a sidekick. Or at least needed someone to blame if anything went wrong. And now it had.

I stopped in my tracks. Now I was the one who was angry. Boiling angry. I was finally tired of