

Clayton Stone, At Your Service

Ena Jones

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For Jeff

And for Blake, Kevin, Ena Marie and Thomas

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Sunday, April 8, 3:34 p.m.

CHAPTER ONE

The gun muzzle presses against my neck. For a second I wonder what the pavement will look like if Wacko Man pulls the trigger. A lot bloodier than any Xbox scene, no doubt.

Well, shoot. No, not shoot. I mean, dang it. How the heck did I end up in this mess?

But I know how. One stupid phone call, an overheard conversation, plus an idiot kid—me—who does exactly the opposite of what his grandmother wants, equals *this big mess*.

Thirty-six hours ago I was more boring than vanilla ice cream, doing normal seventh-grade stuff. A pretty good lacrosse player with twenty goals and half a season still ahead. Decent scores on almost every game system within a ten-mile radius. And the most average thing? I might actually pull off straight Cs this quarter at my uptight private school.

Enter Captain Thompson. Enter listening devices, disguises, GPS trackers and microphone chips. Enter me, thinking I can help save the world, or at least one mom and her daughter. There's a new definition for *sucker* on Wikipedia. It's a picture of me: Clayton Patrick Stone. And I'm not smiling.

First came the phone call.

Saturday, April 7, 5:45 p.m.—21 hours and 49 minutes earlier

CHAPTER TWO

I'm up in my gramps's office hanging with Bart, the stuffed buffalo, after a long, wet afternoon at lacrosse practice. The third floor was a better place to hang out when he was alive. Gramps, not Bart. I never knew Bart when he was alive.

Sometimes I can even forget that Bart's the only one to talk to up here, but then there are other times. Like right now, when I tell him the guys are coming over tomorrow and we're gonna play some video games and order burgers from Big Stone's, the diner my family owns. Gramps would have gotten real excited, maybe asked if he should run out and get the latest Madden for us. Bart just stares at me with glazed, indifferent eyes.

Gramps's office is in the attic of my grandparents' super-old stone house, with a view over the treetops. In the winter, if you stand on your tiptoes and find the exact right angle, you can see the Potomac River.

I don't do that anymore.

Anyway, after a couple of turns at Gramps's indoor putting green and a few throws at the dartboard, I slide across the wide-planked floor in my socks. I can smell Gran's pot roast, and the thought of a good dinner is making my stomach gurgle. Practice today was tough, and I am *hungry*.

Photos and awards line the long attic walls, so thick I can barely see the whitewashed plaster underneath. When I was little, Gramps used to carry me from one end of the room to the other and point out all the important people he and Gran were photographed with. “This is the secretary of state in 1982,” and “This is the president of France.”

I don’t get why so many important people wanted a picture with the Pickle King of the world. If they only knew how much Gramps hated the pickles that made him rich!

I’m looking at a photo of Gran and Gramps with the first President Bush when a ringing phone startles me about two inches off the floor. Even though it’s an office, I’ve never heard a phone up here before. Seriously, never.

My socks and I slide over to Gramps’s desk, and I pick up the receiver. But all I get is dial tone. The phone rings again. The sound is coming from across the room . . . Gran’s desk? If I’ve never heard a phone ring up here, I’ve twice as seriously never seen my grandmother sit at that desk. And I’d swear on a stack of Bibles she hasn’t been inside this room for the last year. She won’t even come up the stairs.

I fly across the room—well, not literally—and land in the chair so hard it rolls backward. I scoot forward and scan the top of the desk. I still don’t see a telephone, and the high-pitched ringing seems to be getting louder. The sound is coming from somewhere inside. I tug at the top drawer. It’s locked, and so is the next one. The third drawer opens and there’s nothing. Until I look more closely.

In the back left corner gleams a small gold key. I grab it—could this be what I need? Only one way to—

Ha! The key turns and the top drawer opens, and there it sits: a plugged-in cell phone flashing a red strobe light and blaring long streams of noise.

Something about the ring feels wrong. My stomach forgets about the pot roast downstairs long enough to tighten, warning me to leave the phone where it is; telling me, Don’t even touch it. And for sure don’t answer it.

But I'm stupid that way. I bring it to my ear.

"Uh, hello?" I say.

I can hear somebody on the line, but they hesitate before they speak. When it finally comes, the voice is impatient. "Liza? He wants to speak with you. Hold on."

Since when do I sound like a sixty-year-old lady? "Uh, no. She's downstairs. Hold on a minute—I'll get her." I fumble with the cord, unplugging it from the inside of the drawer.

Sometimes I swear Gran has ESP, and this is one of those times. Because I know she's been on the first floor, cooking dinner—but just as I'm about to run and get her, there she is in the doorway, staring at me and shaking her head like something terrible has happened. But that can't be true; all the terrible things have already happened.

Then my heart stops. Behind her stands a big man in one of those serious suits, and holy mother of the Mafia, he's obviously not here to bake pies.

The man in the suit nudges Gran into the room. "Go ahead, Liza, he'll tell you everything." His tone isn't exactly friendly, but the way he says her name doesn't sound like he's here to use that not-so-concealed gun of his. So I swallow big and hold out the phone while my heart trips over itself to start pumping again.

Gran puts the phone to her ear. "This is Liza Stone."

There's a pause, and then she sighs. "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and "But, sir, I'm not sure if..." and then, "Of course, Mr. President."

More silence, then, finally, "Yes, sir, Captain Thompson is here. I'm sure we'll figure something out. It was lovely to speak with you again, too. Good-bye, Mr. President." With a forceful poke at the screen, she hangs up the phone.

Did she say *president*?

"Gran, was that *the* president?" I point to a picture on the wall. "*Our* president?"

But Gran's not listening to me. She's glaring at the man in

the suit, her blue eyes as steely as Big Stone's kitchen. "Derek," she says. And the way her tongue slices through his name and lands hard like a guillotine on the *k*, I know she's furious. "I can't believe you've put me in this position. When Jack retired, that was the end. I have Clayton to consider."

The man in the suit—Derek—nods. "You're right. And I have Clayton to consider, too. And if Jack were alive, he'd consider Clayton. And in case you missed it, President Hampton is considering Clayton."

Each time he says my name, it feels like hot oil sizzling across my shoulders, and I know something big is going on. The president of the United States is considering me? What the heck happened, and how did my name get in the middle of this?

But Gran doesn't let him keep talking. In two strides her long, perfectly manicured fingernails are twisting around the muscular man's ear, pulling him toward the stairs like a second grader being hauled to the headmistress's office. Obviously she wants to have the rest of the conversation in private.

No way I'm gonna let that happen. I wait a couple of minutes, and then I follow them.

But I don't take the stairs.

Saturday, April 7, 6:08 p.m.

CHAPTER THREE

There are two ways down. Big, fancy stairs in the front, and the cool way. In the rear of the house, the spiral steps are wrapped with a molded wood slide that winds its way down all three stories.

I launch myself onto the polished mahogany. All the pot-banging echoing up the stairwell as I whiz past the second floor tells me Gran's brought Serious-Suit Man to the kitchen.

I stick the landing on the first floor like a ninja and immediately drop to my knees, leaning far enough forward to spy with one eye.

Gran and "Derek" are nose to nose, Gran holding her wooden spoon in the air like a sword, and the captain's chin up and ready for it. They're going back and forth at each other in fierce whispers that carry through the doorway so well, you could easily say they're screaming—but in a battling iguanas, hissing sort of way.

"You've got the wrong boy, Derek. He's nothing like his grandfather. Or his father. I will admit, there's nobody faster on the lacrosse field. But, mercy! Yesterday I asked him to kill a spider and he practically wet his pants."

Totally unfair. It was a wolf spider the size of a tarantula. In fact, maybe it *was* a tarantula. I would have killed it if she'd

handed me the bug spray. But a friggin' Kleenex pulled from her sleeve?

"Liza," says the captain, completely ignoring her. "The senator's wife and daughter were last seen shopping at Bloomingdale's thirty-six hours ago, the same location of at least four of the previous mall incidents. At the very least, we're dealing with a kidnapping—but if it turns out to be murder . . . You understand, the Meldons are prominent citizens. We don't have much time before the media discovers they're missing."

Gran makes a sound somewhere between a snort and a screech. "Nothing you or the president has told me indicates the Special Service should be involved. You are way outside your parameters here!"

I stare at my grandmother. She's using words like *parameters*. And *Special Service*. What is the Special Service? I am way confused.

She sucks in both cheeks to reel in her attitude. Usually that only happens when the dishwasher breaks at the diner and she's trying to keep her head from exploding.

Her voice gets spooky calm. "Derek, have you interviewed Senator Meldon? He needs to be thoroughly questioned about his wife and daughter's disappearance."

Silence.

"I thought not." Gran shakes her head. "Just because Carl Meldon and the president are golf buddies does not mean you can ignore standard protocol."

She's bossing the captain like she bosses me—the way she used to boss Dad, and Mom, and Gramps. I can't keep up with whatever it is she's saying—mostly because I'm still trying to figure out what *parameters* and *protocol* mean—and every time the captain tries to interrupt, she fires another machine gun's worth of words at him. "...I sit on committees with both the Meldons. And I admire Mary Lou. She comes from the Lennox family, but you wouldn't know it, and she devotes a good deal of her time and money to extremely important causes."

“Exactly why we need to find them. She makes even more things happen around this town than her husband. If the mall napper—”

Gran doesn’t let him finish. “Derek, I understand you think this may be related to the mall napper crimes, but regardless of the Meldons’ political stature, that is no reason for you to show up at this house practically demanding to use my grandson as bait...” Her voice gets sharper with each word and finally lowers again as she accuses him with a glassy, hard stare. “You know we’ve already lost Jack and Clayton’s parents in service to this country. Don’t you think the Stones have given enough?”

Okay. Now that they’re talking about me and my family, my brain starts processing faster than a Formula One in the heat of a race—but it’s not sure which lane to take. Gramps served the country? Like my parents? But he wasn’t in the navy. Or army. Or anything. And they want to use *me* as “bait”? To get the mall napper dude?

The mall napper is the reason some parents have been bordering on the paranoid side of overprotective. We live in Virginia, right across the river from Washington, DC. For almost a month, some bozo has been capturing moms with their kids and making the moms drive to an ATM to get cash.

Half the time he screws up somehow and ends up getting away with nothing—or not as much as he wants, at least. The biggest problem is his gun. “Nothing worse than an idiot with a gun,” says Gran. The police want to catch him before somebody gets hurt.

But if this is the same person, and he’s starting to seriously kidnap—or murder—there might be a reason to stay home and lock the doors.

I stand up and walk into the kitchen.

Gran is saying something about “appropriate channels,” and I see the captain inflate his chest and grow six inches closer to the ceiling. His voice sounds like rumbling thunder as it bellows over her; this time he has her attention.

“Liza, you know the Special Service does undercover better than any agency around, but we don’t have a kid. And to pull this off we need one. *Today!* We wouldn’t ask if this weren’t a critical situation. And that’s the reason we thought of Clayton; yes, he’s athletic, but most of all, he’s got Stone blood. Whether you think so or not, he takes after—” He abruptly stops when he notices I’m standing beside him, but I know he was about to say my grandfather’s name.

Gran looks at me, and then back at the captain, and for a fraction of a second I see her eyes glisten. I don’t know how this man knows us, but Gramps was involved with him somehow. And that’s got to be why Gran’s upset. Is she remembering the three days Gramps was missing? Before they found his body on the banks of the Potomac? As fast as it came, the moment is gone; her eyes are dry and solid Stone again.

My grandmother steps over and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Clayton, Captain Thompson was about to leave.”

They need a kid, and the president himself sent the captain here. I stare up at Captain Thompson, and the words somehow stumble out of my mouth. “Maybe I should try to help, Gran.”

The captain clamps down on his lower lip and raises his eyebrows, sending my grandmother a wordless question. After a few seconds, she lets out a sigh and sets her wooden spoon on the counter. She moves to the kitchen table and reluctantly nods at us as she takes a seat. “Well?” she says.

The corner of the captain’s mouth curls victoriously, and he turns and sits beside her, pushing a chair out for me to join them.

I do. Captain Thompson looks at Gran for a moment and then stares directly into my eyes. “Why don’t I tell you about our plan?”

Sunday, April 8, 3:15 p.m.

CHAPTER FOUR

Less than twenty-four hours later, I'm in the underwear section at Macy's. Shopping. Normally, I wouldn't be caught dead here. Now I might be.

Caught dead, that is.

I lean over and mutter to my shoe, trying to act like bra-shopping with my fake mom is a regular day in the life of me. "Can you hear me? Over."

By order of Gran, I've been plastered with every possible listening device and GPS tracker. Microphone chips are sewn into my collar, embedded in my watch and superglued to my belt buckle. Can they hear me? Holy mother of micromanagement, of course they can hear me.

A gruff voice hits my ear and I can practically see the captain's forehead do that back-and-forth accordion squeeze, like cars on the Beltway at rush hour. "Clayton, don't talk back to me, or anyone. How many times do I have to tell you? There's going to be all sorts of communication over this frequency. Don't speak to anyone but Agent Moxie—and remember, she *is* supposed to be your mom."

I adjust the iPod wire hanging from my ear. "Got it."

"Clayton, I mean it. Not another word."

“I said okay!” What does he expect when he gets me up at 6 a.m. for three hours of training? It’s taken two ginormous Cokes to keep my eyes open. Does the man think I’m gonna do everything right?

Between rainstorms, we’ve made three trips to the SUV in three different lots, all from different stores, at different malls. So far, no bad guy. This time we parked it way deep in the Macy’s parking garage. And the sun’s finally come out.

Agent Moxie—my fake mom—puts her hand on her hip and glares at me from across the rack of black doodads she’s whizzing through. She points to a spot a few feet away. “Billy, why don’t you sit beside the cash register while I look at these nightgowns?” Her polite tone doesn’t match the flamethrower look in her eyes. No doubt, she’s slick. Not even the saleslady has caught a whiff of her disagreeable personality.

And when did she decide to call me Billy? *Billy*? Huge note to self: next time—if there is a next time—I pick my own code name.

I sit in the chair and start messing with the half-rigged iPod some technician wearing glasses and a lab coat gave me during my “emergency training” session. Actually, he called it a SpiPod, and then chuckled, like that was funny. What does he think this is, an Alex Rider adventure?

“Okay, we’re almost set,” says Captain Thompson, his voice penetrating the earbuds. “Clayton, you follow Agent Moxie’s lead. Same as before, you’ll approach the vehicle like a regular mom and kid. You know what I mean, Clayton. Pay more attention to your iPod than to the fact that you’re walking through a parking garage. Click the Forward button if you understand.”

It’s way tempting to say something, but I keep my mouth shut and tap the screen with my thumb.

“Great. And remember the sedative stick we gave you. Just in case. It’ll put him out immediately if things go haywire. Okay?”

I tap the screen again, wishing there were an Eye Roll button.

“Good,” says Captain Thompson. He pauses, then murmurs

something I can't decipher. After another few seconds, he continues his brief. "Now, Moxie, we've got one guy hanging out by the entrance. He's a definite watch. There's another pacing up and down the ramp, talking on a cell. He might be moving because he keeps losing reception, or he could be waiting for his wife—who knows? We'll probably do this a few more times today, because neither one of these guys matches our target's profile."

After a brief pause, the captain says, "Let's try this again—thirty seconds. Remember, all you need to do is draw this guy out of hiding. Once we're sure it's him, our people will move in."

I stare at Agent Moxie as she checks something in her oversized purse. She's dressed in a canary-yellow jogging suit that definitely cost some bucks, and she looks exactly like all the rich ladies who shop at the Galleria. She puts her cell to her ear and finishes listening to the captain.

"Come on, Billy, we've got to get going." Agent Moxie's command is all the warning I get—the canary is in flight, heading for the department store exit. I stick the other bud in my ear and rush to catch up.

We move through the electronic doors, and I try to keep my eyes fixed on the screen of my SpiPod. Twice I look up, hoping to spot the guys the agents are watching, but the captain is on me. "Clayton, pay attention to what you're supposed to be doing!"

Oh. My. God. But I do my best to cross the street and walk toward the mall parking garage like a normal kid. Only, that's sort of impossible. I'm carrying an instant-deep-sleep sedative stick in the pocket of sagging black jeans that Gran would *never* let me wear in real life. And then there's Mr. Big Shot shouting in my ear. *Nothing* about this day is ordinary.

As we enter the garage, shafts of afternoon sun beam between the massive concrete columns, but any real light is fading fast, and the farther we walk, the creepier it feels. Even squinting, I can barely see the silver SUV we're headed toward. I shuffle along, struggling to keep up with the super-stride of Agent Moxie.

“Moxie? Clayton? I’m getting static. Can you hear me? Hold up!” It’s the captain’s voice, and he sounds uptight.

I raise my eyes to my “mother.” Can’t she hear the captain yelling at us? Is she ignoring him? Crud. What the heck am I supposed to do?

I slow my pace. “Hey, Mom.”

She turns. “Yes, Billy?”

I hold out one of my earbuds. “Listen to this song.”

“Billy, we need to get home.”

Jeez. She *is* slick. That’s exactly what a real mom would say.

“C’mon, Mom, you’ll like it.” If the captain wants us to hold up, there has to be a darn good reason. This guy we’re after has struck almost every day for the last few weeks. Now that he’s maybe kidnapped the senator’s wife and daughter, Captain Thompson says he’s getting greedy, and that makes him even more dangerous.

Agent Moxie gives her head an impatient shake and snaps the tiny piece of plastic out of my hand, stretching the cord. It’s not long enough, so she gives it another good yank and holds it to her ear.

My other earbud is now hanging down my shirt, and I tighten my grip on the SpiPod. I cock an eyebrow at her and whisper, “Something must be wrong with your earpiece.”

She purses her lips and nods. Only, it’s not nodding. She’s trying to move her head to the beat of the band she’s not listening to. Huh. There’s a lot to this undercover stuff.

Agent Moxie finally takes out the earpiece and, with a weird smile, gives it back to me. In a loud voice she says, “That wasn’t bad.” Then she puts her arm around me and begins to move toward the SUV. She squeezes my shoulder and whispers, “You were right. Apparently, my earpiece *isn’t* working. The captain says there’s a man headed this way, but he’s pretty far behind us. They’ve backed off surveillance to give him room. Stay on the driver’s side of the truck so we aren’t separated.”

I feel the blood pulsing through my neck as Agent Moxie

pulls away from me. She's still got that disturbing smile on her face as we approach the vehicle, and it occurs to me: Does she have a gun? More important, is she ready to use it?

Man, what was I thinking? That this was going to be cool? My birthday is on Friday. Carlos from the diner said he'd make my favorite cake, the one stuffed with custard and fresh strawberries. I've been looking forward to eating it since January. Now I just want to *make* it to Friday.

We're ten steps away. The truck has tinted windows and we can't see inside. And we can't see through to the other side where somebody might be standing. Waiting.

Fear and regret are pumping through my bloodstream and my legs are floating forward, like all gravity has disappeared.

Five steps away. I scan the other cars parked sporadically around us and tell myself we'll be okay. All we have to do is get this guy.

Agent Moxie pushes the remote button on her key chain. The doors of the SUV click and the lights flash hello.

Three more steps. Nobody around. Maybe we got this all wrong. Agent Moxie walked too fast. Maybe we'll go to another store and try all over again. And this time I'll duck into the bathroom and hide until dinner.

Two steps. Agent Moxie reaches for the door handle as my shoes crunch something. She turns at the sound and her eyes flit past me; she opens her mouth as the captain speaks in my ear.

"Clayton, tell Agent Mo—" That's all I get before a dark force comes from behind and wraps a monster arm across my body. Then, as if the message isn't clear enough, he squeezes my rib cage and bends my arm so hard I squeak. I can't move, and I don't know whether it's from fear or it's physically impossible, but I can't make another sound, either.

The earbuds drop from my ears, one at a time, and dangle for a split second before landing with the SpiPod on the concrete below.

Agent Moxie ricochets off the SUV, ready to fight, but the

monster of a man puts something hard against my neck. It hurts. And by the look on Agent Moxie's face, I know it could hurt a lot more.

"You turn around and get in," the man snarls at Agent Moxie. "We're going for a ride."

He pushes me against the SUV. "You, too, rugrat."

I lock eyes with my fake mom. I guess we'll listen. At least for the next minute or so.