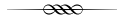


# CHAPTER ONE



“Give me your money, or I’ll put a bullet in your kid’s brain!”

With every fiber of his being, Peter wanted to move. He longed to throw himself in front of his mother and fling the hateful attacker to the floor. To rebel against this false authority, this intruder who claimed power.

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

But underneath his desire to fight stood a mere boy of eleven years, robbed of all courage, strength, and resolve. Like a cornered animal, unable to flee, he gazed down the barrel of the gun and into the eyes of his predator.

The man's face drew nearer to his own. The wild, bloodshot eyes penetrated Peter's very being, piercing his heart and leaving a scar that would never fade.

Peter's grasp tightened on his mother's arm. Her skin felt cool and clammy.

"Did you hear me?" the robber hissed, flooding Peter's face with foul breath.

The handful of others in the bank remained frozen in place. To these country folks, living in a small town where nothing unpredictable ever happened, the world seemed to come to a stop. Stark terror hung in the air. The banker stood behind the counter like carved stone, his hands extended above his head.

Peter and his mother had come to the bank to cash a check. The local grocery store wouldn't accept anything but cash, so the bank was the first stop on their list of errands. With money

in hand, she turned from the counter, taking a step toward the exit as she fumbled with her purse.

Peter and his mother never made it to the door. The stranger, who had walked in unnoticed, stunned the entire room by revealing his gun and shouting for everyone to stay put.

After ransacking the small building, the thief had a large bag full of money, and Peter's mother was his last victim before he took off with his booty.

Peter dared to glance at his mother, who had not yet said a word. It was pure shock and an awareness of the robber's unpredictable nature that kept her paralyzed.

The thief lunged forward and latched his hand onto the back of Peter's neck in a vise-like grip. He brought his weapon forward, pressing the cold muzzle against Peter's forehead. "Good-bye," he whispered to his prey.

Every muscle in Peter's body tightened as terror clawed at his heart. He could feel only one thing.

The icy metal against his skin.

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

And he could see only one thing.

The icy eyes of his soon-to-be murderer.

Time stopped. The world blackened. Peter's breathing slowed; his body went limp. His heart, which had been threatening to burst through his chest, now nearly stopped altogether.

*Goodbye.*

“STOP!”

The blackness disappeared in a rush, and the world—in all its color and terror—snapped back into place. Peter's vision was restored, and a sudden alertness hit him like a slap across the face. He craned his neck to see a trembling woman, holding out her hand in the madman's direction.

“Get your hands off my son!” his mother demanded. “You can take my money! Just get out of here!”

The man's grip loosened, but he didn't release Peter altogether. Leaning in the direction of the mother, he reached for the cash in her hand.

“No! Let go of my son first!” she exclaimed with surprising boldness.

The thief had lost enough precious time. He needed to make a run for it.

He released Peter so abruptly that the boy had no time to react. His weakened legs gave way beneath him, and he dropped to the floor like a sack of flour.

Finally satisfied, the robber took his leave. Peter watched him go, deaf to the wailing sobs of his mother as she knelt down beside him and clutched him to herself. His forehead tingled, still cold from the gun's touch.

The invisible wound across his heart burned within him. An iciness crept into his being as the fleeing man disappeared from his sight. Was the man a drug addict? A wanted criminal? Peter never knew who he was, nor would he ever see him again.

After a long moment, the people in the bank seemed to let out their collective breath at once. They looked at each other incredulous, not quite knowing how to react. Some even laughed with relief. They had been spared.

But the small eleven-year-old boy, sprawled on the floor of the little bank in the Midwest, would never be the same.



In a small, charming restaurant, two young women had stopped for a bite to eat after work and were seated in a booth, conversing casually. “So, I’ve noticed you’ve been talking with the new guy at work. Peter, right?” asked Hailey, the dark-haired woman, as she stirred her coffee.

“Yeah, we actually went to high school together,” answered Diana. “He used to race bikes.”

“Motorcycles?”

Diana smiled and shook her head. “No, bicycles. Like Lance Armstrong.”

“Oh, cool,” Hailey said, looking up with more interest. “He must really like his job then. He’s doing bike deliveries, right?”

“Yep. He’s like a mailman on wheels.” Diana chuckled, taking a sip of her iced tea.

“I’ve also noticed that he’s been hanging around with the guy who sounds like the Crocodile Hunter.”

“Yeah, that’s Ben. He’s Peter’s buddy. He grew up in Australia. I’m actually starting to become good friends with both of them. Be-

cause our departments overlap, we see quite a bit of each other at the office. Ben moonlights as a comedian. The guy is hilarious!” She suddenly paused, her eyes widening in shock. “Ben! Oh no!” she gasped, clapping her hand over her mouth.

“What?” Hailey set her mug down, alarmed.

“I’m such a dope, Hailey!” Diana pressed her palm against her forehead and rolled her eyes. “Ben’s show was tonight and I totally forgot about it! He was especially getting on me about going to this one, and I promised I would!” She let out an enormous sigh of frustration.

Hailey couldn’t suppress a smirk. “Oooh, busted! He’s not going to let you live this one down.” She giggled into her coffee mug as she took another sip.

“I know! I can’t believe I forgot! I’d better text him right away.” Diana whipped out her phone and began dictating her text in an Australian accent. “I’m so sorry. I beg your forgiveness.” Both girls broke into laughter.

“So were you and Peter good friends in high school?” Hailey inquired after a slight pause.

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

“Actually, no, not at all,” Diana replied. “We didn’t even really know each other. He was just in one of my classes. He was pretty popular—kind of known for being a partier. He seems different now, though. Something about him has changed . . . but I’m not exactly sure what it is.”

Hailey shrugged. “People change.”

“Yeah,” Diana added thoughtfully. “They definitely do.”



Quiet laughter and excited murmurs rippled through the audience as anticipation filled the room.

A young man in his twenties, seated in the crowd, craned his neck over the fidgeting, whispering people to catch a glimpse of the stage. Vacant and dark, it evoked an air of impatience from the crowd.

Peter ran his fingers through his mop of brown hair, glancing down at his watch. *Any minute now*, he thought. Every seat in the place was filled, and he was as eager as anyone for the night to begin.



Finally, a lone light flickered on, partially illuminating the stage. A hush descended on the audience, like a blanket settling over the entire room.

A figure, unidentifiable, stepped onto the stage. The shadows kept his face safely hidden. He stood for a moment in silence, a mere silhouette.

“The time has come for change,” began an authoritative voice. “For far too long in this country, too many of us have been afraid to speak up about the things that matter.”

Heads turned, as several people in the crowd exchanged surprised glances with each other. Was—was that the voice of President Barack Obama? It sounded identical, a flawless representation.

“Regardless of our apprehension, the time to speak is now.”

The mysterious figure stepped forward, allowing the spotlight to flood over him, revealing his identity. A tall white man, good-looking with a stubble beard, stood before them.

Peter grinned as he watched his long-time friend up there, performing for hundreds of

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

people at the crowded comedy club. He was proud of him.

Several titters and chuckles echoed through the room from amused audience members. This guy was good, the imitation perfect. Others just stared in fascination, eager for him to go on.

“The time for change is now!” the young man continued, in the articulate tone of the president. “Together, we can change American football to rugby. Helmets are for wimps!”

Peter’s eyes grew big. Ouch. He turned to catch the reaction of the audience.

“Boo! Not funny!”

But the place roared with laughter. They couldn’t help it.

“All right. Sorry.” The voice of Obama melted into an Australian accent, the comedian’s real voice. Now the crowd didn’t need an explanation for the insult. “Joking about the president, okay. Joking about football, not allowed. My bad.”

A wave of laughter rippled through the audience again. This guy was hard not to like.

Peter laughed along with them. He clapped for Ben Price, a man he looked up to for his boldness and the ability to entertain people and bring them joy. *What a guy*, he thought, grinning from ear to ear.

His friend was on a roll. “I love Arnold Schwarzenegger. He’s done a movie recently with Sylvester Stallone. Stallone calls him and says, ‘You know, I’m wondering, you know, would you like a cameo in my latest movie?’ And Arnie says, ‘I’m too busy for a cameo. But how about a small part?’”

As Ben continued his impersonations, his talent was increasingly evident. His imitation of various actors, famous characters, and well-known celebrities made for an excellent performance.

The lively show finally came to an end. Peter joined in the heartfelt applause as Ben wrapped up the night with a final farewell to his audience.

Peter stayed seated, as one by one the crowd dispersed and trickled out of the comedy club. He waited for the room to empty before heading backstage.

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

“I’m here for an autograph...,” Peter said, clapping slowly as he approached his friend.

“Thank you, man.”

“Not yours.”

“Ahh.” Ben grinned as he packed up his laptop and held it out to Peter. “Take my bag.”

“No, no. I’m union, I’d better not,” Peter quipped. As they headed for the exit, he continued. “Really, man, you did great, as always. I mean, everyone was laughing and having an amazing time. But I thought they were going to waterboard you over the rugby thing,” Peter commented, smirking.

“Yeah, I know. It was a risk, a risk I was willing to take.”

“No risk, no reward, huh?”

Ben let out a hearty laugh, and Peter joined in.

When the two friends were together, the real world faded into the background as their lighthearted friendship took center stage. For them, the comedy show never ended. They always had something to laugh about.

After meeting at a comedy workshop, the

two of them hit it off immediately and became good friends, never ceasing to enjoy each other's company. Ben had even found a position for Peter at his workplace. Also, their friendship had hit a deeper level because of Peter's recent conversion to Christianity. They now shared the same beliefs and convictions.

"So, when are you going to step onto the stage?"

Peter blinked.

Ben might as well have dumped a glass of cold water on him.

"Me? I, uh... next week. Oh, never, that's what I meant. Never, yeah." Just thinking about it made his stomach clench in knots. A nerve-racking anxiety stole over him anytime he talked in front of even a few people, much less an entire crowd.

"No, seriously, you've got some great material," Ben persisted. "I think you're ready."

"Yeah, but you laugh at anything." Peter gave him a knowing look.

"True." Ben grinned. "So when are you going to do it so I can laugh at you?"

## AUDACITY *A Novel*

“Well, what do I owe you for that inspiration, Tony Robbins?”

“Seriously, I just want to be the first to throw something at you.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You know who liked that joke? Nobody.”

Both of them laughed once again, but inside, Peter mulled over the possibility of stepping onto the stage. He knew it would take a miracle for that to happen. Though he had a strong interest in stand-up comedy, and a desire to make others laugh, a deep fear in his heart hindered him.

Fear had been pursuing him ever since he was a boy. A leech that clung to his being, it sucked away every ounce of boldness he possessed. A mere acquaintance in the beginning, it now tried at every circumstance to claim him altogether.

And one day, if Peter wasn't careful, fear would become his master.