

**Even the Sweetest Smile can hide the Deadliest Intent.**

*How do you tell people who love you, you have been  
deceiving them since you met?*

*How do you admit everything they thought they knew about  
you, every last thing, was a lie?*

*A carefully fabricated, coherent lie, but a lie never the  
less...*

***...and one that could get them killed!***

# Death Mask

# Chapter 1

Thirty-one seconds.

It took thirty-one seconds to complete the mission.

Thirty-one seconds to eliminate a small town family.

From the moment they opened the front door, having disabled the porch light first, the clock was ticking. No alarm sounded, no lights flashed; a testimony to time spent by the mission commander's people hacking the security alarm company's servers.

Four figures dressed in dark jumpsuits, tight-fitting ski masks, the moonlight occasionally glinting off hard eyes. Their wrists were taped to the double surgical gloves they wore. The same gloves that clothed the hands holding the pistols with their long suppressors. No DNA was the objective. Any hope the cops would solve this one would end here. Their transport, a panel van, along with all their clothing and shoes, would be torched within a few hours. The weapons melted down, as was standard procedure.

None of the four had ever seen the faces of the other members of the team before tonight. All wore facial prosthetics when they met for the first time three hours ago. They had quickly donned ski masks, and wore these over the fake features. Not one had spoken; not a single word. Only thumbs up from each one after the briefing had finished. The briefing had been done via an encrypted voice link. They could be seen by the mission commander, heard if they made a sound, yet they could not see him ...or her. Voice distortion delivered a flat, deep voice with metallic overtones.

Floorplans were available. Some photographs of the inside of the house; images of the objectives taken from a distance. Four; one for each to dispatch. The team leader assigned locations and targets to each. A taped area on the warehouse floor served for practice run-throughs. Timed. Initially, more than a minute to complete. More efficient after the tenth trial. Then they worked on what-if scenarios, creating resistance from the house occupiers, or finding them in unexpected locations.

Two hours, and they were confident. Again, no words; a raised thumb sufficed. The tape was torn from the floor and rolled into a sticky ball, then bagged and thrown into the van.

Two hours three minutes and they were ready. A last weapons check. Then board the panel truck.

Two hours five minutes, they pulled out of the warehouse and drove to the highway.

Three hours...

...and thirty-one seconds.

Four kills.

Confirmed.

Two adults. Two adolescents.

Mission completed successfully...

...or so they believed.

## Chapter 2

*The gelid wind bit deep into my throat, its fangs reaching my straining lungs. I coughed harshly, doubling forward, hands resting on tremulous knees. It was so quiet; I could hear my heart thudding. No one on the streets at this hour of night. No one to interrupt my thoughts. Thoughts? There hadn't really been any since I closed the front door softly behind me, pulled the woolen hat tight over my bunched-up hair, and performed a few basic stretches, rushed. I wanted to be running, wanted to hear the pounding of my footfalls on the deserted roads. I longed for the still mind that accompanied me on my daily runs. My opportunity to switch off from the World.*

*Yet this wasn't a normal run. I'd brought today's excursion forward almost eight hours. Running in darkness, rather than in the morning light. I wasn't seeking the solace of familiar sounds, the comfortable encounters with neighbors, the waves and nods as I trotted past. I was unlikely to meet anyone out in the cold now.*

*And that suited me fine.*

*He had hit me with a surprise dinner reservation. I don't like surprises. So, what's so special about a dinner reservation? Well, when it comes with a proposal of marriage, it kind of threw me. I was quite happy with the situation as it was. A steady partner, two great kids who accepted me into their family, a predictable job selling books in a town where people still read. I'd moved in with them more than a year ago, after having dated for twelve months.*

*I'd been cautious.*

*Truthfully, I'd been afraid.*

## Chapter 3

They did not remove their masks in the back of the van. Only the leader, who was driving, took his off, leaving the prosthetics underneath in place, so as not to attract attention.

The streets of north-west Albuquerque were quiet. Dawn was still several hours away. The dark purple sky showed a sprinkling of stars as they stayed off the main roads until they were clear of the city. Their instructions were to head east, then south using US 54, cross over into neighboring Texas at El Paso, then disburse. The driver was to torch the van and its contents before continuing to his final destination, Washington D.C., by air.

Three hundred miles give or take; a little more considering they had a problem with the Satnav in the van on their way to their destination, but it had resolved itself once they left the quiet neighborhood where their targets resided. The screen had been programmed with their route in and out and had glitched some fifteen miles before Albuquerque. Still, the leader had a general sense of where they had to go from studying the route back in the warehouse. The street name was odd too, so that helped when they had stumbled across it.

He glanced at the Satnav frequently now. He had been told to make a call on the new burner phone to the only number stored in its memory when a message popped up on the navigation screen. Ahead lay the small town of Corona. The leader took a right on to Main Street which would become US 54 once they left the town behind. A few lights, no people, no moving vehicles; not many signs the town was occupied. Then again, this early in the morning, it was to be expected. The route had been planned to avoid witnesses. It was possible someone had seen the panel truck near the targets' house. Maybe law enforcement would think to look for it outside the city. The fewer people who might have seen the anonymous vehicle in the early hours of the morning, the better.

The Satnav flashed a message a couple of miles past Corona. '*Call now*' left as a waypoint on the GPS system. He fished the burner phone from his jacket, flipped it open and pressed the speed dial key. It did not ring; the connection was immediate.

"Report!" The same metallic tones from the warehouse.

"All went as planned. Four down; verified."

"Did your team check faces?"

"No time. We heard a cop-car siren and thought it best to move out of the area as soon as we could. But the targets were where they were supposed to be, so zero error."

"You are heading toward El Paso as instructed?"

"Yes."

"All your team and any compromising materials in the panel truck?"

"Affirmative."

There was no verbal response.

A few seconds of bewilderment before the leader's life ended.

The phone exploded.

Its small, hidden charge of Semtex, wedged around the interior components, was enough to disintegrate the man's head in an instant.

The van veered violently across the two-lane highway. It glanced off a '*Pass with Care*' sign. Two wheels left the ground; the prelude to a series of barrel rolls. As the van momentarily righted itself, a second, more intense explosion from its underside threw it high into the air, still spinning crazily. The second charge had been placed deliberately near the fuel tank. A secondary explosion as the gas fumes ignited, morphing the

van into an incandescent ball of orange flame.

The burning hulk finally came to rest twenty meters into the scrub. Small fires started as the dry foliage exploded in sympathy.

No witnesses.

No perpetrators.

No loose ends.

## Chapter 4

*My running autopilot moved my feet through the route, one of the ten different routes I took, without me being aware of anything. My surroundings, a blur. A familiar blur, yes, normally conducive to a quieting of the mind; a mental oasis which allowed my body and intellect to find the stillness I sought.*

*Not tonight, though.*

*I'd stolen out of the house, careful not to make any noise, to wake anyone. Not even a note to explain my absence. No need; I'd be back long before anyone stirred. At least, that was the plan. I might, if they opened early enough, grab something tasty for breakfast from the local bakery. A surprise for them. That was okay – surprising them, that is. It was the other way around that did not fit into my world.*

*Yet the stillness, selfish seclusion, did not submerge me in its longed-for embrace. What was he thinking? What was so wrong with the way things were that he had to change them?*

*Funny. Those two 'normal' questions, common to people with staid lives perhaps, were also the first two my mind threw up.*

*Maybe it was fear.*

*Fear, not of the marriage proposal, the amendment in our circumstances, the formality of paperwork and registration. No, I was pretty confident I could sail through that without any untoward issues emerging.*

*There was another kind of fear at play.*

*Fear for them.*

*The marriage proposal did not just modify my status; it made a huge difference to theirs, though they would not know it.*

*The stream of racing words abruptly cut.*

*Behind me, approaching fast, bright lights. Harsh, white full beams, flooding the road with shadows as it neared.*

*I took a sidestep onto the sidewalk, then another, crouching below the trunk of a parked car.*

*White light turned seventies disco. Flashes of sharp blue and spicy red. The swoosh of tires, a buffet of wind, as the vehicle shot past.*

*In a hurry. Yet, no siren.*

*An 'in progress' or a 'too late'. The first warranted silence. The second, what was the point?*

*No, I didn't like surprises.*

*My stillness took a permanent sabbatical, replaced by accentuated awareness. Details flooded into my brain, to be analyzed, recognized, sequenced and filed. A part of my mind, grown lazy of late, struggled to regain the single-minded focus of the past.*

*Now free of my temporary hiding place, my running rhythm had increased, shortening the distance toward the red and blue reflections ahead.*

*A fork in the road.*

*A choice.*

*Staid said right.*

*The past said left.*

*I hesitated; just a fraction of a heartbeat, then headed uphill, right, back home.*

*Staid won.*

## Chapter 5

*I could hear the stirrings, the brood loudly repeating their daily routine amid shout to claim first turn in the shower. I smiled. I'd beaten them all. A quick, hot deluge, followed by a breathtaking cold chaser, taken three hours before, got me the number one position that day. Then I made hot chocolate, intending to sip it in the dark of the lounge until sleep signaled. Only, it didn't. The drink downed, my eyes wide open, my ears scanning for sounds, my heartbeat slow, measured.*

*At the first footfall, I had walked to the kitchen, set the coffeemaker into motion, took ingredients for French toast from the cupboards. No bakery bounty today. The radio, the TV, were off. The house creeping out of its nocturnal silence, embracing the rowdy breakfast banter of three males, just like every other day. Today's subject was a basketball match this evening. Was their father going to be there after work? They knew I would attend; I always did.*

*Todd, the eldest, breezed into the kitchen, his eyes hunting for the remote. The TV drowned out his cheery salutation. He lowered the volume in time for me to hear "Ah, French toast! Great! He turned his attention to the refrigerator. Now his brother, still toweling his wet hair, entered.*

*He was as energetic as his sibling, though quieter, more thoughtful. He turned to me.*

*"Hi Zoe. Good morning. You sleep well?" Genuine interest. Then his nose identified the French toast.*

*"Hey, Todd; we haven't overslept a couple of days, eh? Zoe's making her French toast and it ain't Sunday."*

*"Good morning, gang." The deep tones of my partner. A kiss. A raised eyebrow. An unspoken question. I was about to reply when the drone from the TV drew my attention.*

*"...Mayor Greely, what can you tell us about this incident?"*

*The Mayor, overweight, sweating even at this early hour, stood in the road in front of a string of police line tape. Over his right shoulder, several APD SUVs, lights flashing, and a couple of unmarked sedans. Over his left, white overalled figures wheeling a gurney carrying a body bag. My eyes were drawn to the house in the background. Its design, so familiar. The camera zoomed onto the front door as a detective exited. My mouth opened as I saw the number.*

*"...four victims; the whole family; all shot, execution style..., " the Mayor growled.*

*"Fuck!"*

*I never swore. They had never heard me, at least. Movement stopped. The kids looking between me and their father. Him just staring. At me.*

*It wasn't the expletive.*

*I caught a glance at my reflection in the window overlooking the yard.*

*Pure, unadulterated terror looked back.*

# Chapter 6

*How do you tell people who love you, you have been deceiving them since you met?*

*How do you admit everything they thought they knew about you, every last thing, was a lie? A carefully fabricated, coherent lie, but a lie never the less.*

*And, worse, one that potentially could get them killed.*

*I could see three sets of eyes, loaded with questions, wary of my words.*

*“Fuck!” I had said again.*

*Then...*

*“Sit down all of you. NOW!”*

*They had never heard that tone before.*

*I had somehow metamorphosed into something new, someone unfamiliar, in the time it took for me to grab the remote and add to their anxiety.*

*“Shut the fuck up for a minute. All of you. Not a word.” My eyes fixed on the screen, the volume raised to uncomfortable.*

*“...and you have no clues as to why this family was targeted?”*

*“No. At this moment, APD detectives are just starting their investigation...”*

*“Hey, that house! It’s just like ours...”*

*“...it even has the same number...”*

*“Zoe? What’s going on?” The latter, a strained, almost guttural whisper from their father.*

*I turned to them.*

*“I’m sorry, guys. No basketball this evening. You have to leave now.” Spoken softly. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder toward the TV. “That...”*

*The words came hard. Syllables that would change their lives forever.*

*“That should have been us!”*