

Chapter One
Men Without Faces

The first rumble of thunder was too far away to awaken Peter Franklin, but deep within the secret realm of his unconscious mind, a dream formed in response to the sound. A minute passed and then a sharp, though still distant thunderclap released the dream from unconsciousness. Strange, troubling images ascended to his mind's eye. He tossed over to his left side, then back to his right, but did not wake up.

In his dream, Peter was no longer seventy-two with a face wrinkled and creased by years in the sun and thinning gray hair, but strong and young with curly brown hair, a flat stomach and once again supple arms and legs. As strong as he was, however, he could barely keep his head above waves that slapped across his face, making it hard for him to take in a desperately needed breath. There was a large tree jutting up out of the water. In between the waves striking him in the face, Peter caught glimpses of a desolate shore shrouded in acrid smoke. Though the shore was close, he was unable to move toward it. His arms and legs felt as though they were weighed down by iron cables. Treading water frantically, he caught sight of several men without faces standing on the shore. Peter waved and shouted to them. As they noticed him, he saw they were clutching huge guns

in their hands. Suddenly, in unison, the faceless men leveled the guns in Peter's direction and fired. Somehow, he managed to take cover behind the large tree before the bullets hit their mark.

Peter glanced to his right and saw there was another man in the water, someone in even more danger than him. This man was the same age as Peter, with the same short cut hair and strong, young body. He had a narrow face barely old enough to be shaved. His frightened pale blue eyes darted round about him with all the distress of a little boy separated from his mother on a bustling city street. The man's head bobbed above and beneath the water like a cork at the end of a fishing line. When the man broke the surface, there was a look of helplessness on his face that filled Peter with a terrible sadness. He called out to the terrified man in a voice so choked by sobs, he could barely wrest the words from his throat.

Because of the faceless men with guns, Peter dared not move any closer to the man, though he desperately wanted to help. He gazed toward the shore and saw that more faceless men with guns had gathered there. They too started shooting at him and the unknown man. The bullets splashing in the water were like handfuls of sand being thrown by children playing a deadly game.

Peter screamed at the faceless men to stop shooting, but they only laughed maliciously and continued firing all the more.

He glanced back at the panicked man and saw him slip under the water as bullets splattered all around him. He surfaced again and caught sight of Peter. His child-like eyes pleaded for help. Peter stared in horror as water began to swirl down the man's open mouth the way it drains out of a sink. His eyes bulging with fear, the man sank beneath the surface of the water while Peter cried out to him over and over again. As if in reply, his head bobbed back up again. He stared at Peter with an unwavering glare until slowly submerging under the waves for the last time. Peter wept because he had not dared to help the young man with the pale blue eyes.

A crack of thunder jolted Peter out of his dream. For a moment, in the storm-darkened morning's half-light, he was disoriented. He managed to slip on his glasses just as a sharp burst of lightning illuminated the room. Though Peter recognized his bureau, the nightstand, wall lamp, chairs and bed, everything now appeared foreign to him. Had he awakened in the bedroom of a total stranger? Or was this room the dream and the reality was the water and the brutal faceless men trying to kill him and that other man? He couldn't be sure.

Peter's breath caught in his throat and he sat bolt upright. Beads of sweat covered his forehead and trickled down across his face. He shivered from the chill wind blowing in upon

him through the open window just over his head. He took in a few deep breaths in try and calm himself.

Another brilliant flash lit up the window shades and a clap of thunder shook the walls. He caught sight of himself in the mirror on the dresser facing him. In that instant, his gray pallor, sunken eyes and disheveled hair gave him the sensation he was observing his own corpse. The room seemed to shrink in, threatening to crush him. He sprang out of bed and stood transfixed as his familiar bedroom came to seem a coffin burying him alive.

Peter flipped on a light and stared at his image to assure himself he wasn't a corpse after all. With trembling fingertips, he touched the stubble on his face, his bushy eyebrows and his large, protruding ears. He patted his hands over his slender shoulders and rubbed his paunch. Assured he was still alive but still shaking violently, he picked up a favorite photograph of his daughter-in-law and granddaughter together in their garden. It was the one he always kept on the nightstand next to his bed. He stared at the picture of Jennifer and Heidi, forcing himself to focus on their smiling faces, each with a daisy woven into their sandy blond hair. He recalled all the laughter he had shared with the two of them the last time they had come to visit him. When was that anyway?

Three years ago? Four? Too long, much too long a time. Such a beautiful child and such a lovely mother. They're my family. I hope I can see them again soon. Perhaps another visit might be arranged. Yes, that can be done. I will see them again soon. Of course I will.

Clutching the picture to his heart, he paced back and forth. He fought an impulse to rush outside into the storm to escape the nameless fear squeezing in upon him. He raised a window shade and stared out at as lightning revealed, for a moment, the maple trees in his yard tossing about wildly in the storm. He counted the seconds between a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder.

The intervals lengthened as the storm rolled away. He continued breathing in deeply as anxiety seeped away little by little. Finally, with lightning on the horizon but no longer any sound of thunder, he turned back to his bed. Drenched in sweat, he collapsed upon it.

Peter glanced over at the clock on the nightstand by his bed. It was 6:30 AM on June 6th.

Fifty years to the day, he thought. My God, to the very minute.

He forced his eyelids to stay open, afraid he would dream again of cruel faceless men and the helpless man who died because he had been too afraid to help him. But an hour later,

when the clouds parted and sunlight filtered languidly through his curtains, Peter was sound asleep.