

COLDHEARTED

“Someone once told me that I was coldhearted. They believed it. I didn’t.

Kids learn how to cope. Bullied kids find that special superpower inside that pushes them to survive. They wear masks on the outside for the world to see, but inside they are raging, struggling to experience normal.

Bullied kids face fear every day. They are beaten by words or actions—both cause pain; both leave scars. Eventually, they build a strong armor around their hearts that thickens over time.

Bullies yell. They strike out with angry words and tight fists. Bullies grow puffy. They need power to feed their powerless existence.

Though they rarely know it, the bullied are stronger than their enemies because they have the courage to face their demons every day and seek deep within themselves to find the serenity they so deserve.

Bullied children often replace pain with numbness; fear and anger with indifference; chaos with peace. They find a way to move on—sometimes they seek revenge; sometimes they become feared.

Someone once told me I was coldhearted. They were wrong.

I suppose they’ve never been bullied.”

~Paige Dearth

The Beating Path

Seven-year-old Tony Bruno feared the dark hands of death were reaching for him. His small feet pounded against the hot pavement as he tried to get away from the boys chasing after him.

In midstride two of the seven-year-old boys snatched Tony by the back of his worn-out T-shirt. His arms flailed spastically. He tried to make contact with his small fists. One boy got angry and yelled, “Knock it off, Bruno, ya little queer.”

Tony was dragged through the trash that lined the sidewalk.

“Leave me alone,” Tony cried in a high-pitched voice.

“Shut up, Bruno. I swear if ya open your mouth again, we’ll kill ya,” Vincent snapped.

Tony twisted and pitched against the boys. He fought with everything he had in him, but he was no match for the kids who used bullying as an after-school activity.

Tony’s eyes fixed on his surroundings as if he were seeing them for the first time. He looked into the open lot, taking in the small patch of trees and overgrown grass. On either side of the lot were brick buildings with broken windows that revealed the lifeless blackness within. Vines clung to the exterior as if they’d grown there from the inside out. Tony never walked between the buildings. It was taboo. This place scared him. This was the place where the monsters lived. He’d heard the groan of drunks coming from deep inside the cavity of the broken-down buildings when he’d walked by months before with his mother.

Tony fixated on his mother’s words now.

“There are googamongers that live in that place. Do ya know what a googamonger is?” Teresa had said.

Tony had shaken his head, scanning the trees and buildings, waiting for a humanlike creature to come after him.

“They’re real big. Bigger than your father. They got long claws for fingers and real pointy teeth. They like to eat children ’cause every time they eat a kid, they grow stronger. So you keep your skinny ass outta there.”

Tony was paralyzed with fear thinking about the googamongers. He kept fighting against his tormentors, but they dragged him deeper into the forbidden lot. Vincent and his friends forced Tony into the shadow of a small grouping of trees. Tony peed himself, imagining the googamongers watching him, getting ready to eat him. His stomach turned with a wispy emptiness. Tony made one final attempt to free himself and got one arm loose. Vincent punched Tony in the gut, and a few seconds later, Tony’s head slammed against a large oak tree.

Vincent poked his index finger into Tony’s sternum. “Give us all your money.”

“I ain’t g...g...got no money.” Tony stared into Vincent’s rich brown eyes through the jet-black hair that fell in front of them.

Frankie grabbed Tony around the waist and threw him to the ground. Then he pulled Tony's T-shirt over his head and threw it off to the side.

"Look!" Frankie stood over the boy. "Bruno peed himself."

The boys stood in a circle around Tony and laughed.

Vincent turned to his best friend, Patton. "Grab the bucket we left in the grass."

Patton stared for a moment as if he was trying to read Vincent's mind. He jumped up and down and clapped his hands together. "Yeahhhhhh..." he sang as he ran into the tall grass.

Patton raced back to the noisy circle of boys. Vincent pulled the old plastic clothesline they had stolen from the neighbor lady they called Mrs. Mean. He handed the line to Patton, who threw it over a tree limb while another boy turned the bucket upside down.

A few minutes later, Tony was standing on the bucket with the plastic cord around his neck. His fingers clawed at the cord with frantic desperation. His body shook. In the heat of the day, Tony's teeth chattered. He couldn't think. His mind went blank. While Tony didn't comprehend the possible consequences of the boy's actions, he felt he was in grave danger.

Vincent looked at Tony and smiled. "He looks just like that cowboy in the movie. They hung 'im from a tree; then one of the guys kicked the horse he was sittin' on, and the guy fell off. He was swingin' by his neck. It was so cool—his legs were movin' like he was ridin' a bike, and he was twitchin' and stuff."

The energy in the small group of boys was a blend of morbid curiosity and fear of the unknown. Tony's motions were jerky. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The more his fear showed outwardly, the higher the energy level rose through the circle of boys.

"I need to go home," Tony cried. "My ma will be lookin' for me."

"You'll go home when we say ya can," Patton hissed. Then he picked up a long stick and whacked Tony on his bare back. The rough, bark-covered branches dug into his tender flesh and left bloated, red welts.

"Wow! Let me try that," Vincent said, picking up a branch and slashing it across Tony's abdomen.

Tony continued to pull at the cord around his neck. Each time one of the boys whacked him with a stick, he flinched, and the rope tightened. After a short time, Tony's muscles went limp, and he welcomed the numb feeling inside his head. His eyelids drooped, and he stopped fighting. His shoulders flopped forward, and his head hung. With a lack of oxygen, death crept upon him, bringing him the closure he longed for.

"Hey! What the hell are ya boys doin' over there?" A male voice boomed.

Vincent turned and saw a delivery-truck driver at the edge of the lot; he was coming toward them.

Vincent screamed, “Run!”

The boys took off in different directions, but Patton hesitated for a moment and kicked the bucket from under Tony’s feet before he took off.

The cord was just long enough so Tony landed on his tippy-toes, but the initial fall tightened it around his neck, jarring him awake. Tony tried to suck in a breath, and when nothing came through, his panic heightened, and he lost his balance. He lost his battle against the strangling cord. His windpipe betrayed him, and the lack of oxygen gave him comfort again.

The deliveryman reached Tony right before he slipped out of consciousness. He lifted Tony’s small body and held him on his hip, as though he were a toddler. The man quickly loosened the rope around Tony’s neck. Tony gulped air into his lungs, and the bluish color in his face shortly returned to normal.

“What the hell happened here?” the deliveryman said. He pulled a knife from his pocket and cut the cord.

Tony rubbed his neck with his fingertips. He looked around with a pinched expression. Then he remembered. “Vincent and his friends followed me. And...and...they made me come here and...”

Tony sobbed from the memory that rushed into his mind.

“OK, big guy. What’s your name?”

“Tony.”

“Well, I’m Mac. Let’s get ya home. Where’s your shirt?”

Tony looked around the tall grass in a daze. It was gone. Carried off by Patton.

“Forget the shirt. Ya all right?”

Tony nodded.

“Ya think ya can stand?” Mac said, placing Tony on his feet.

Tony wobbled at first but then gained his footing.

“Where do you live?”

“Over that way,” Tony said, pointing in the direction of his row home.

Mac slowly walked Tony to his house and stood at the front door with him.

“Everything will be fine,” Mac said and softly rapped on the front door.

“What the hell did ya do now?” Tony’s father, Carmen, yelled, when he flung the door open.

“Nothin’,” Tony replied timidly.

Carmen looked at Mac, whose mouth hung open.

“What the hell are ya starin’ at, and who are ya, anyway?” Carmen barked.

Mac adjusted his stance. His legs locked at the knees and his chest pushed forward. “I just found your kid being hung from a tree. A group of boys were hurtin’ him. Those boys ain’t got no scruples. Your son almost died.”

“My *son* almost died ’cause he ain’t got no backbone. Now, go on and deliver your packages. Stay the hell outta other people’s business.”

Mac stared at Carmen for a moment. Then he bent down and looked into Tony’s eyes. “You take care of yourself. Stay away from those boys. Ya hear?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I wish they’d just leave me alone.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud! Get the hell in this house before I give ya another beatin’.”

Tony knew from Carmen’s squinty eyes that his father was having a worse day than normal. For a passing moment, Tony wished that he could go live with Mac. He didn’t want to face his father, not alone, not again.

After Carmen slammed the door, he turned to his son. His eyes poured over Tony’s gangly body, and he bent slightly at the waist to look closely at the purple mark that the cord had left around his neck.

Carmen’s upper lip lifted. “Where’s your shirt?”

Tony sniffled, his fear ignited by his father’s venomous stare. He took a few steps backward and crossed his arms over his abdomen.

“I asked ya a question, boy.”

“The kids stole it from me.”

“Why did ya let ’em steal it?”

“I didn’t let ’em. They made me.”

“That’s ’cause you’re a little weasel. Ain’t got no man in ya.”

Carmen grabbed a handful of Tony’s thick brown hair and pulled his head back to look into his son’s green eyes. “You’re pathetic. Go to your room, and don’t come out till I say so. While you’re up there, I want cha to think about how much ya embarrass me. I swear your ma cheated on me with another man, ’cause ya ain’t no son of mine. Look at ya! Covered in all those scratches and bruises. The sight of ya makes me sick. Get outta my livin’ room before I slap the shit outta ya.”

Tony gimped up the steps as quickly as he could manage and shut his bedroom door gingerly. He pulled on a clean T-shirt and lay on his bed, waiting for his mother to come home. He rubbed his arms

and legs with open hands. Pulling the blanket from his bed, he wrapped himself tightly and waited. He put his hand up to his forehead, expecting it to be on fire, but it was cold and clammy.

Then his bedroom door flew open. He sat up quickly, and the blanket dropped to his sides when he saw the belt in his father's hand. Carmen's hand lifted into the air, and the belt came down on Tony with a hard crack. The beating went on for several minutes, and when it stopped, Tony lay in a ball wishing the boys had killed him.

Chapter One

Tony's father, Carmen, had been placed in a Catholic orphanage after his mother died, when he was barely three years old. The nuns who ran the facility had believed in the saying "Spare the rod; spoil the child." When Carmen turned six, his father brought him back home after marrying another woman. But his stepmother, with three children of her own, didn't take to Carmen. She complained about his appearance and lack of manners. Over time, Carmen's father beat him, trying to make his son into what his new wife wanted. But the more beatings Carmen withstood, the greater the anger the child stored inside. Many days of his childhood, Carmen walked around with black eyes or bruises on his body. Immediately after graduating high school, Carmen was thrown out of his home and out of his father's life.

Carmen took a job as a roofer. He hated the labor-intensive work, feeling like it was below him, and a year later, after marrying Tony's mother, Teresa, he was hired by a large rigging company in Philadelphia, where Tony's family lived.

Teresa and Carmen had met in high school. Teresa had followed in her mother's footsteps and had become a seamstress at a small bridal shop.

Ten years into Carmen and Teresa's rocky marriage, with two kids, Carmen was laid off from his job and fell into a deep depression. To ease his sorrows and worries, he let his casual drinking become excessive, sloppy, and repulsive. The neighborhood watched the transformation, and he became a big joke to those who knew him. Because his rigging skills weren't in high demand, Carmen couldn't figure out what to do to earn a living.

Teresa bore the brunt of Carmen's anger over what he considered a failed life. Tony remembered the first time his father had struck his mother. One of the neighbors had just left the house after dropping off pants for Teresa to hem.

"Why do ya have to let the neighbors in here?" Carmen had growled.

"Because I'm tryin' to earn some extra money. What kind of question is that?"

"It's the kinda question a man asks when his wife is actin' like some sniveling beggar lookin' for a couple of dollars. Look at cha—ya look ridiculous wit' that measuring thing hangin' around your neck, kissin' that bitch's ass so ya can make a couple of dollars."

"Well, if ya got a real job, maybe I wouldn't have to take in side work," Teresa had fired back.

Tony had been lying on the floor in front of the television with his sister, Macie, who was three years younger than he was. He pretended like nothing was wrong, but Carmen's anger escalated, and his father rose from his worn-out recliner. He thudded over to Teresa and punched her hard in the belly.

"Stop it," Tony cried.

Like a grizzly bear drawn to a new noise, Carmen turned toward Tony and took a few steps in his direction.

Teresa grabbed on to Carmen's shoulder, and he flung her off.

“You little bitch. Don’t cha ever try and get in my way,” Carmen yelled. He grabbed Teresa’s arm and twisted it behind her back, sending her to her knees.

“Carmen, stop! Please stop!”

“That’s where ya belong, on your knees suckin’ me off.”

As Carmen let go of her arm, he grabbed a handful of her hair, and she rose to her feet. Carmen put his face close to hers.

“Now get in the fuckin’ kitchen and do your fuckin’ job before I break both of your arms.”

Teresa was crying as she looked over at Tony, with Macie wrapped in a tight embrace. “Come on, Tony. Come help me in the kitchen.”

Tony cautiously walked by his father with Macie behind him. Her small arms were fastened around her brother’s waist. As Tony slunk by his father, Carmen jabbed him in the temple with his thick fingers.

“Get the fuck outta my sight. I can’t stand any of ya.”

Tony pulled Macie toward his mother as she started for the kitchen. When they were alone, Teresa grabbed her children and held them tightly.

“It’s gonna be all right,” Teresa said in a low, shaky voice.

“I’m scared,” Tony said. “What if Dad hurts us real bad?”

Teresa looked into her son’s eyes. “I’m scared too, baby. We just gotta keep ’im happy. That means doin’ what he says and stayin’ outta his way.”

Teresa swallowed hard. “Just make sure you’re a good boy.”

“But I didn’t do nothin’, and he hit me in the head just now.”

“That’s ’cause ya was lookin’ at him. Don’t even look at ’im no more. Not when he’s mad like that.”

“Why can’t we just go live with Grandma?”

“’Cause her and Grandpa don’t need our problems. We just gotta deal wit’ ’em on our own.”

Now, as he lay on his bed nursing the welts from his father’s beating, Tony rubbed his face with his hands. He kept looking toward the doorway for his father to appear while his mother started dinner. The room closed in on him until the small space made his breathing ragged. *What are we going to do now? How can I help my family?* Tony thought.

Chapter Two

The day after the hanging incident, Tony crouched low in the corner of the brick building in the schoolyard. His arms were crossed over his head to protect himself. The schoolyard was filled with children, playing and laughing, several watching him from a distance. The teacher and her aide stood across the long stretch of blacktop, unable to see through the crowd of rowdy second graders to where Tony was being bullied.

“Get away from me,” Tony whimpered.

“You’re such a dork. Maybe if we kick your butt again, we can knock the dork outta ya,” Vincent said. Five of Vincent’s friends stood around in a semicircle, egging on the harassment.

Vincent laughed wholeheartedly, and then he kicked Tony in the leg. Instinctively, Tony grabbed the spot where Vincent’s sneaker had landed, and Vincent smacked him on the top of the head. Tony put his hands up to cover his face, but Vincent didn’t let up. He kept on slapping and kicking Tony until all of his own rage was spent.

“You’re an idiot, Tony. Ya ain’t even smart enough to be in school. Ya should just stay in your house and never come to school,” Vincent said.

“Maybe we can hang him again,” Patton said.

Vincent smiled. “Would ya like that, Bruno? Gettin’ hung again?”

Tony hyperventilated. Tears stung his eyes. He held his breath and curled his hands into tight fists. He feared the boys; he feared his father. His life had become lightless. He felt as though he were in a deep, dark, wet hole filled with sticky hatred.

As Tony’s anguish escalated, he could no longer hold back his wails of sorrow. The group of boys watched him for a moment; then they walked away, satisfied. Tony lay in a fetal position on the pavement, wishing that someone would come to his rescue.

After several minutes, Tony sat up cautiously and looked around, embarrassed. Groups of children on the playground stood motionless, watching him. Several small clusters of children were giggling and pointing. Others wore faces of relief, happy that Tony’s fate was not their own.

In kindergarten and first grade, Vincent and his friends had stuck to verbal assaults. But now, in the second grade, they had become physically abusive with Tony, turning their teasing into torment.

Tony was scared to move but even more worried the boys would come back and make good on their promise to hang him again. He got to his feet and walked slowly toward the door that led into the building.

“Hey, Tony,” Brian, another second grader, said in a friendly tone, approaching him. “Here, do ya wanna drink?”

Tony turned toward the boy. He watched Brian for a moment; then a smile played on his lips. Tony's throat was dry. He looked at the condensation on the soda can and imagined the cool liquid sliding down his scratchy throat.

"Thanks a lot, Brian," Tony said, reaching for the can.

Tony put the can to his lips. The liquid splashed over his tongue; then, as he swallowed, he tasted the dirt.

Tony choked on the contents and spit the foul mixture onto the ground.

"You're such a moron," Brian taunted, as the other kids laughed. "You're so easy to pick on," he added.

Tony fell silent. His head hung, and his shoulders drooped forward. He walked fast toward the doors of the building. He wanted to get inside, to hide from his peers.

Miss Cassidy, Tony's teacher, scanned the schoolyard, and her eyes stopped on Tony. She rushed over to him as he gripped the door handle.

"Tony, what happened to you?" Miss Cassidy asked. Instinctively she gently touched his red cheek. Then she discreetly wiped away the saliva and dirt stuck on his chin.

"Nothin', Miss Cassidy," Tony said, his voice barely audible.

"Nothing, huh? Well, it doesn't look like nothing to me. Come on. Let's go inside and rinse your face with cold water."

Miss Cassidy looked around and spotted Vincent and his friends gawking at her. She lifted both eyebrows and pinched her lips together at the moment that Vincent made eye contact—a sign to let the boy know she was onto him. Miss Cassidy took Tony by the hand and led him into the building.

Once they were alone, she knelt down and placed her hands on Tony's shoulders. "Were Vincent and his friends picking on you?"

Tony shook his head slowly, but he wouldn't make eye contact.

"Are you sure?" she pressed.

Tony nodded. He thought about snitching, but the bees buzzing around in his belly reminded him there would be consequences.

"How did you get that bruise on your neck? It looks like someone was choking you."

"I ran into somethin' at my house."

"Tony, are you telling me the truth? Is there something you need to talk about?"

"No, Miss Cassidy. Can I go to the bathroom?" Tony said.

Inside the boy's bathroom, Tony looked at himself in the mirror. He was repulsed by the hollow person who stared back at him.

"You're a dork," he said out loud. "Everybody hates ya. Why can't ya fight back?"

Tony's impulse was to bust the mirror to pieces and smash the pathetic reflection that glared back at him, judging him.

"I hate ya," he said to his reflection. "I wish ya would disappear. Nobody likes ya. Not even your father."

After a few minutes, Tony washed his hands and purposely took his time walking to his classroom. Every second in the hallway was time away from the mean kids. He opened the classroom door and stepped inside. The room fell silent; then several children snickered.

"Wah! Wah! Wah! I want my mommy," Patton bellowed.

Tony wrapped his arms around himself as if he could ward off the cutting words and scathing stares that sliced through him and settled in the center of his heart.

"Patton! You stop that this instant," Miss Cassidy said.

Patton looked at Miss Cassidy innocently. "What? I didn't do nothin'."

"I want you to go straight to the principal's office," she demanded.

Patton smiled at his friends but didn't move out of his chair.

"This instant!" she yelled, surprising everyone, including herself.

As Patton slid past Tony, he whispered, "You're gonna be real sorry for this, ya stupid jerk."

Tony cringed and edged his way to his seat. He walked through the aisle of second graders cautiously. Only a few feet from his desk, one boy stuck out his foot and tripped him. Tony flew into the desk of one of the popular girls. She looked at him sympathetically at first, but realizing the other kids were watching her, she quickly pinched her nose with her thumb and index finger and turned away.

"Ew," she said, pushing Tony away from her, "you smell bad, and you're ugly."

The other kids laughed, and Tony wished he could disappear, be invisible.

Finally sitting at his desk, Tony gazed at Miss Cassidy as she lectured the class about how to treat each other. Her voice was a constant buzz of white noise in his ears as she droned on about the importance of kindness, an alien concept to him. Tony's thoughts wandered to his father. Carmen would never let people push him around; Carmen had mocked Tony for being weak since the bullying began in kindergarten. The thought of going home with more bruises boosted his anxiety. His heart thudded in his chest; he could feel every heartbeat. Tony knew his father would "give it to him" when he saw Tony's swollen lip. It was the same cycle of insanity. After his peers beat him down, he would stand before Carmen for judgment. Meanness and cruelty seemed inescapable.

When the last bell of the day rang, Tony hurried to the bus and sat in the front seat behind the bus driver. As Vincent and his friends entered, they poked, slapped, or pinched him on their way to the back of the bus. When they arrived at his bus stop that day, he ran as fast as he could until he was rushing through the front door of his house.

Teresa looked up from her sewing machine. “What’s the rush? Hey, come over here—let me take a look at ya,” she said.

Tony walked over to his mother, and she lifted his chin.

“Those no-good little shit stains do this to ya again?” Teresa asked.

Tony nodded.

“Go upstairs and wash up before your father gets home.”

Tony hesitated. “Ma, Dad’s gonna be real mad when he sees me, huh?”

Teresa closed her eyes and lowered her head. “Don’t get all worked up. Your face will get more swollen, and then for sure your father will know ya got an ass whoop...Those boys were pickin’ on ya again.”

To Tony’s delight, his father didn’t make it home before he’d gone to bed that night. As he drifted off to sleep, he imagined being the strongest boy in the world and hurting every single person that had hurt him.