

The Need for Accurate [and Respectful] Depictions of Mental Illness in Fiction

A Thesis Submitted to
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For my father,

If I knew then what I know now . . .

Abstract

This thesis seeks to address the ongoing misrepresentation of mental illness in popular media, specifically within film, television, and literature. The power of the media is instrumental in public perception, and the ongoing negative misinformation and inaccuracy of mental illness those who are affected by it in media is instrumental in spreading harmful stereotypes and stigma. This affects not only the way that the general public views mental illness but also the way those with mental illness view themselves as well as their desire to seek help. I use these forms of media to showcase both the negative and positive representations of mental illness, namely schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety, to show the ways in which mental illness should be treated, on both the screen and the page, to both stop the perpetuation of damaging stigma and to harness the power of media to help change the tide on public misconceptions.

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Artist's Statement

Confessions of a Storyteller

I was six years old. Sitting in a musty trailer, my back ramrod straight and eyes wide, I watched the very first movie I ever remember watching. The opening credits rolled in that heavily-shadowed, '80s font, giving way to the youthful drawings of children brandishing knives amid a town full of dead bodies. I've got to hand it to screenwriter George Goldsmith who gave the entire backstory of the film in grainy crayon pictures, how the cult-like town full of children murdered their parents and, subsequently, anyone else over the age of eighteen. Stephen King's *Children of the Corn* is not at all a film for children—certainly not six-year-olds—yet, there I was, feet still unable to reach the floor from where I sat on my dad's coffee-brown couch, between my step-mother and step-sister, as this cinematic experience cemented itself in my brain and developed in me both a fear so deep it had me sleeping with a nightlight until adulthood and a profound love for all things horror.

Often writers talk about how they've always been a writer, how they've spent years of their lives, as far back as childhood, penning tales for their family and friends and anyone else who would listen, but that's not my story. What I was as a child, more than anything else, was a reader, and that love for literature has driven me for most of my life. If there were words in it, I was drawn to it; everything from my mother's psychology textbooks to my grandmother's dime-store romances all held my interest, but what drew me in above all else, was horror. In 1995, at the age of seven, I discovered my brother's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, and though the iconic Stephen Gammell charcoal-and-ink illustrations terrified me, filling my dreams with bleached black-and-white skeleton faces and wide demonic grins for weeks on end, I couldn't put them down. My brother and I would camp out beneath his blankets, a mini battery-powered

lantern propped up in the bed between us as we took turns reading them aloud to each other, always hiding the pages so the other wouldn't read ahead and spoil the *BOO!* finale.

But soon, I moved on from the more “juvenile” stories, leaving my brother alone with his crinkled, worn-out paperbacks as I progressed to the masters of horror. I picked up a few of my mother's Dean Koontz novels, my fourth-grade teacher recommended Edgar Allen Poe, and my grandmother had one dog-eared copy of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* hidden way up on the top shelf where she thought none of her grandchildren would find it. But the one that irrevocably changed me was *Pet Sematary*. It was only fitting after Stephen King started my horror journey with *Children of the Corn* at six years old that he'd be the one to really hook me in with his horrific tale of the Micmac burial ground and the reanimated corpses of Louis Creed's family. After that, I devoured everything of King's that I could find, and though I would often goad my brother into staying awake longer than me so that I wouldn't have to be up late alone, I couldn't get enough. I got my first taste of fantasy alongside Roland Deschain in *The Gunslinger*, felt the first stirring of love for Bill Denbrough in *It*, and cheered for Danny and Wendy in *The Shining*.

Perhaps I never considered myself a “writer,” but I always gravitated toward writing. As a child and into my early twenties, my writing consisted mostly of nonfiction—essays, diary entries, and the occasional poem—but I have always been a storyteller at heart. My mother likes to tell this story where she was once again called in to speak with my principal about my incessant talking. When my mother advised that they put me in a corner so that I could have no one to talk to, the principal responded, “Ma'am, she *is* in the corner. She's talking to herself.”

My predisposition for storytelling required no audience, it seems—a welcomed fact given the amount of time I spent on my own as a “latchkey kid,” most often curled up on my mom’s couch wrapped in a scratchy hand-knitted afghan with a book in my lap.

One constant throughout my childhood was that I gravitated to books far above my recommended reading age; I skipped many of the children’s classics growing up—*Charlotte’s Web*, Roald Dahl, and the *Little House on the Prairie* series. But the only “children’s books” that I could never get enough of were those within the *Harry Potter* series. When the first book was released to American audiences in 1998, a woman with Scholastic came to mark the opening of my elementary school’s book fair, and she read the first few chapters of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* aloud to an auditorium of children sitting cross-legged on the floor, hanging on her every word. Like Hermione with the magic found inside the walls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, this woman had us all enthralled, and I think the book sold out on the first day of our book fair. But I’d secured a copy, and I finished it within two days. That woman, pulling us all into the pages of a book with her thick-Scottish Hagrid accent, had ignited a love for Harry Potter that rivaled even my love for horror, a love that stays with me even now, over half a century later.

I’d like to say that Liberty’s MFA program is what developed in me a love for writing, but the true benefactor of that would be Harry Potter fanfiction. I discovered the world of fanfiction in the same way that I discovered horror, by happenstance. At three a.m., in a sleep-deprived, bleary-eyed state, I scrolled through the many Harry Potter fandom groups I was a member of on Facebook, and when someone mentioned fanfiction, I was willing to read anything to keep me awake during my daughter’s seemingly never-ending night feedings. And there, amid the sleepy cries of a newborn and the smell of breastmilk, I fell in love with Harry, Ron, and

Hermione all over again—though, to be fair, the stories I read quickly moved on to characters with far less canonical page-time than the Golden Trio, like Draco Malfoy and Sirius Black.

For four years, I read any fanfic I could get my hands on, but it wasn't until 2020, at the height of the pandemic, that a story bloomed in my mind, a story that focused on far more “adult” themes: PTSD, depression, and the loss of friends and loved ones during a war full of children soldiers. I dug through archives and asked around in the dozens of fanfiction-specific communities I was now in, but once I determined that the story I was looking for did not actually exist, I decided I'd just have to write it myself. Thankfully, someone pointed me in the direction of a fanfiction writing community, and I joined at just the right moment, at the beginning of a year-long writing crusade, designed in elaborate and intricate detail to pseudo-mirror a Harry Potter-themed Dungeons and Dragons campaign. Through the next year, beside other die-hard fandom nerds who were writing silly Harry Potter stories online, I discovered that I loved writing in a way that I'd never truly enjoyed any other hobby. I've been an artist all my life—I've painted and drawn, scrapbooked and crafted for as long as I can remember—but all of it was to obtain a product, to have a finished *thing* at the end. But writing was different; it is the act of creating itself that I enjoy more than anything else. The end result is great, as were the thousands of readers I acquired over my first year posting online, but it was no longer the goal.

I no longer felt like I was outside of the writing community, a fanfiction *reader*, simply enjoying what others created; I was a part of it. I became a beta reader, trading my services as an unpaid editor with others so that they would critique my work as well, and with that, I was able to learn alongside some of the writers whose work I'd been reading for years. Though I'd always loved reading, this, too, was different. It's one thing to simply be a reader, but to be a part of the story in some way, to help the author give it life, it takes you out of the audience and puts you at

the controls along with the writer. This all served as the perfect way to learn not only writing but all the levels of editing as well, all of which worked together to help me exponentially hone my craft.

At the same time, I was approaching the halfway point of Liberty's Marriage and Family Therapy graduate program, and to say I wasn't loving it would be an understatement. My focus in education had always been mental health, with my undergrad being a dual degree in Behavioral Health and Language, but it took completing half of my therapy degree before I realized that I absolutely could not be a counselor. I talk far too much and listen far too little for that, but thankfully, my newfound interest in writing—and the discovery that I had quite the knack for it—gave me the perfect opportunity to switch degrees. Through Liberty's Master of Fine Arts program and my year-long campaign in the fandom community, I learned writing techniques at a practical level—using sensory language to keep the reader engaged, investing the audience in the character's plight, and the age-old axiom “show, don't tell.” In that first year, I wrote two full novels and multiple short stories, a total of 427,612 words—not a word of it publishable due to the nature of fanfiction, but I didn't mind. I had a tangible thing, something I had created, and with that came a sense of pride that I'd never experienced with any other type of art.

A Christian Writing Horror

Though I am both a Christian and a writer, I do not feel that I am a *Christian writer*. I believe that the market does offer quite a lot more opportunity for writers of Christian fiction than what there once was, but the genre itself remains largely unchanged over the years. The parameters of most “Christian literature”—uplifting in nature, inspirational storylines, overt

Christian themes, no profanity or darkness—is not only too limiting for me, but it isn’t representative of the world we live in.

The world itself is a dark place, and being an accurate storyteller—especially one who wishes to scare the pants off their readers—requires a bit of darkness. Even in my Harry Potter fanfiction, where magic and fantastical creatures abound, the human side of the story remains truthful, and my goal of any story, mystical or otherwise, is to give an accurate representation of human nature. This brings into question the adage based on Jesus’s teaching in John 15 and 17, “to be in the world, not of the world,” but I don’t think the horror genre itself is contradictory or damaging to my faith at all. On the contrary, horror allows a writer an opportunity to explore the more terrifying aspects of life while also exploring the supernatural and faith itself; it allows us to search for deeper understanding of the world around us. Horror itself speaks to the fallenness of our world, the very basis of a biblical worldview, and authors like Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker have crafted their careers writing horror and suspense that is built around their Christian faith. Filmmaker Scott Derrickson (*The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *V/H/S/85*, *Sinister*), a devout Christian who also makes horror films, wrote of the supposed “dichotomy” of the horror genre and Christianity saying, “This is the perfect genre for a person of faith to work in. You can think about good and evil pretty openly. I always talk about it being the genre of non-denial. I like the fact that it’s a genre about confronting evil, confronting what’s frightening of the world” (Carey). And, let’s face it, there is quite a bit that is frightening about the world.

Sins of a Son

As a child, my foundation firmly planted within the pages of horror novels, I believed far more of it was real than I care to admit now. This went beyond the normal gullibility of children.

Along with the accidental gift of horror films at six years old, my father gave me a profound belief in the supernatural.

The next paragraph comes from a short story I wrote about my father's psychosis, though, as the excerpt implies, as a child I didn't see him as mentally ill; I believed in his demons as much as he did.

One of my father's favorite activities was to tell spooky stories. Looking back on this now as an adult, I can see that he did this as a way to cope himself. He would sit me and my brothers in his big bed, all of us snuggled in tight with only the red ember of his cigarette visible in the darkness, dangling from his lips or occasionally smoldering in the ashtray in his lap. I can't remember every single story that he told us, but I remember enough, and more than anything else, I remember the smell of his Marlboro Reds, the feel of my younger brother's breathing against my cheek, and the thump of a steady drumbeat in my chest. Wrapped in my father's arms, with my brothers' legs stretched out on either side of my own, he grew in me an obsession with the dark, and paired with that, a deep and unwavering fear. Our favorite stories were not those we knew he'd made up. Those still scared us, of course—"The Alabama Butcher" and "The Strangler of Walker Hill" both still occupy space in my mind almost thirty years later—but the ones we requested most were those we thought to be true, those my family believed in as much as the pages of the giant, old King James sitting on top of our television. My father had lived them, had seen the faces in the shadows, had felt unseen hands across his skin, and the thrill of fear made us all too eager to hear them again and again.

When I began contemplating original fiction, the first story that came to mind was one my father told for my entire life, one passed down in my family and believed just as much as

Jesus's words in red. As a child, I took these tales in, made them as much a part of my identity as my father and my grandparents did, and it wasn't until I was an adult that I began to question the validity of the "supernatural." My father's ultimate diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder crashed through the last remaining vestiges of naïveté and helped me overcome my own fear of the dark and whatever creatures may be lurking there, though my anxiety then took on a more rational and practical nature—fear of a similar mental illness surfacing in my early adulthood, at the same age that my father began jumping at shadows and swearing he was being chased by unseen creatures in the night.

According to my father, and his late night spooky stories—when his voice would drop and my brothers and I would have to lean in closer, huddling together beneath the supposed safety of quilts—his little brother had been chased by demons. Actual real-life demons. The same demons that now chased after my father. After my Uncle Mark, twelve years my father's junior, became involved with a cult, a demon attached itself to him, and after his suicide in 1989—just shy of his nineteenth birthday and only a couple months after my first—things began to take an even sharper turn into irrationality.

The phone would ring at all hours of the night, sometimes with no voice on the other end. Occasionally, though, my father and grandparents would be threatened by a faceless stranger on the other end of the line, telling them that they were next. Other times, arguably the worst of the bunch, they would be met with the sound of Mark's voice, crying, begging them to help him, to save him from the fiery hell he was fated to. My grandmother, beside herself with grief already, was on the verge of a mental breakdown. My grandfather was only angry, seeking out help from the police to end the madness, but my father, he embraced the illogicality. These traumatic events changed him into a man who not only believed it all, but also was consumed with the notion that

they were after him next, or what is the most likely answer, his schizophrenia had always been there, just lying dormant, in wait for the right catalyst.

The story became even more terrifying to my young mind and even more unrealistic the older I became. There was a haunted house where the cult did whatever it is that cults do—isn't there always?—a “grotesque, mishappen” creature staring at my father through the upstairs windows when he went to the house, and knocks and voices outside his bedroom windows. These were the tales I heard before bed, the words whispered in the darkness as a warning, as a reminder to remain constantly vigilant against the beasts that haunted our family. As the years progressed, so did my father's mental illness. He would have years of normalcy and then, out of nowhere, intense bouts of psychosis where he couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't . . . when the monsters had caught up to him once again.

Ultimately, my father's descent into psychosis led him to take his own life, exactly how his younger brother had done twenty years prior. After this, after my older brother and I had gone through the seemingly unending list of tasks that accompany planning a funeral, my mind returned to this story, to the story that my father never could outrun, much like the demons he claimed were just around every corner. Then, after putting it up onto a shelf along with all the other unwanted items I'd inherited from him, the story resurfaced again, when my brother asked that I write it all down, to tell the story we'd been living our entire lives. I couldn't write that story though, not the true depiction of the events as they happened—or as my father claimed they had. It's still too raw, even now, almost fifteen years after his death, and instead, *Sins of a Son* was born. Tommy Buckley is a conglomeration of both my father and my oldest brother, living within the confines of a supernaturally-focused, southern religion. I have dug through my family's past, taken out the bits most relevant to the story, and twisted them to fit a narrative that

now only closely resembles the events that inspired it. I've found a catharsis here, a sort of healing in making sense of the senselessness, twisting and weaving a story from the pain and heartache of real life. And with that, I've tried to show the real life struggles of living with mental illness, what these individuals truly do suffer every day. But, for the ending, I couldn't steer too far from my horror roots, the ones cultivated both at the foot of my father's couch with *Children of the Corn* and at his knee as he shared all the spooky stories he knew—those he made up on the spot and those he'd lived.

The Need for Accurate [and Respectful] Depictions of Mental Illness in Fiction

The narcissistic CEO, the antisocial, cannibalistic psychiatrist, the psychopath with dissociative identity disorder and his mother's wig, the paranoid schizophrenic chasing his wife and son with an ax. As *Washington Post* Bestselling Author Sonja Yoerg puts it, as writers, we invite mentally ill characters into our stories because we seek to be truthful about the world around us. Characters with psychological disorders keep an audience curious and engaged, but far too often in the case of mental illness, we rely on a narrative that is not at all truthful, a public perception that runs the risk of demoralizing real-life people with these real-life disorders. Horror media has used mental illness to explain the actions of crazed villains for well over a century. Not only is this lazy writing, but it perpetuates the further stigmatization of mental illness, mental hospitals, and psychiatry as a whole. Though the characters in horror novels, films, and television shows are fictional, the disorders themselves are very real, and whether the disorder itself is given a name in the story or not is irrelevant; the use of a tired narrative device without the appropriate research and respect of the individual in mind continues to spread false information about mental illness and those living with the very real disorders featured on screen and across the page.

The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that one in four adults and one in five children in the United States alone will be diagnosed with a mental illness in their lifetime (Caputo & Rouner). Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, and depressive disorder abound across the globe, with the WHO reporting that four of the ten leading causes of disability are mental illnesses (Caputo & Rouner). Major depression disorder, in fact, is the leading cause of disability for women and children worldwide. Because of these facts alone, it is imperative that the world remain informed on mental health and the prevalence of mental illness. Though

responsibility for this education often falls on healthcare providers and activist groups, the vast majority of people get their information about mental illness from the media they consume, and research has consistently shown that audiences have negative stereotypes associated with mental illness and mentally ill persons, namely due to what is referred to as *the magic window* (Caputo & Rouner 596). Though it may be obvious that the story is itself fictitious, many believe in the perceived reality of the characters they are seeing, judging that the picture they are viewing is an accurate depiction of real life, as if they were looking through a magic window. If the media in question frequently uses mental illness as the scapegoat for atrocious crimes—both in fiction and non-fiction—then the message being broadcast is both inaccurate and offensive. Across media platforms, entertainment tends to follow the precedent set by news media, with charged, biased language and negative images used to describe those living mental illness, reducing the individuals themselves to solely a product of their diagnosis and reinforcing an "us" and "them" mentality (Caputo & Rouner).

The power of media is undisputed. Not every individual reads scholarly journals or psychology textbooks in his or her spare time, but most people do consume some sort of entertainment media, making the latter a major force that can be harnessed to undo much of the stigmatization and misinformation spread by previous television shows, films, and literature. Thankfully, along with the push for mental health awareness, the tide seems to be turning on the way mental illness is shown, with writers using a more thoughtful approach to the stories and characters they've written. Through research, respect, and intentionality, writers can "do no harm" and use their craft to inform rather than misinform.

Though Thomas Buckley, the main character in my thesis project, does suffer from a mental illness, my goal is to maintain the respect required in writing such a nuanced character. In

the second chapter of *Sins of a Son*, the main character, Thomas reveals that he has recently been diagnosed with schizophrenia, explaining his erratic and frightening behavior from before the novel begins. It is my goal to not only write a story that entertains and engages the audience but one that also shows an accurate and respectful depiction of mental illness and the mental healthcare system itself. Though the character is ultimately revealed to not be suffering from a mental illness at all, it is still imperative that the story itself does not become part of the problem with mental illness stigmatization.

The Good, The Bad: Representations in Media

The preoccupation with mental health within fiction media is nothing new. Depictions of mentally ill characters can be traced as far back as Shakespeare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with works like *Titus Andronicus* (1594), *King Lear* (1608), and most notably, *Hamlet* (1603). Though Shakespeare himself has been lauded for his understanding of humanity's often dark nature, not all depictions of mental illness have been positive. For the most part, portrayals of mental illness within media have been a product of their times, when "madness" (a term that is, rightfully, no longer used within the medical community) was rife with misunderstanding and fear. Characters have been habitually shown as violent, threatening, and unreliable, negatively reinforcing these stigmas leftover from before mental health reform in the early 1900s.

Some of the more notable instances of poor usage of mental health within recent media include:

- *Suicide Squad* – Harley Quinn's "mental illness" is played up constantly in order to make the character appear more *edgy* or *other*, and it is never taken seriously. Her psychosis is used as a gag more than anything else.

- *Split* – Despite the impressive presentation by actor James McAvoy, the film demonizes Dissociative Identity Disorder, using the character’s mental illness as an explanation for the kidnap and murder of young women. It also presents a false image of the disorder itself, sending the message that a person suffering from DID is not only violent and dangerous but that they also have a multitude of fully formed identities lying just beneath the surface.
- *The Visit* – This film tells the story of two children going to visit their grandparents only to discover that they have actually been murdered and replaced by two escaped mental patients. Though the film never gives an actual diagnosis, it is clear that filmmakers here are relying on misconceptions of both dementia and schizophrenia, painting the sufferers as murderous and calculatingly violent.
- *A Beautiful Mind* – The real-life tale of Nobel Prize winner John Nash is far less sensationalized. He really did suffer from schizophrenia, though never the visual hallucinations that the film depicts, and the finale of the film shows Nash refusing medical treatment, and instead, managing his illness completely on his own, using nothing but willpower and the love of his wife, a notion that is entirely false and misrepresentative.
- *The Accountant* – This film reiterates the stereotype that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder are savants, in this case, of the mathematical variety. Additionally, this film not only presents individuals with autism as *other* and in need of change, but it also sends the message that their disorder can be completely eradicated by simply training one’s mind.

- *Insatiable* – This *Netflix* series informs audiences that a eating disorder can be solved simply by being unable to eat solid foods for a period of time. After the main character’s binge eating is slowed due to a wired-shut jaw, she is magically cured of her disordered eating and thus becomes thin and beautiful.
- *All the Bright Places* – Mental illness is romanticized in this book, and treatment is presented in such a negative light that it appears as if it should be avoided at all costs. Additionally, one of the main characters commits suicide, and the remaining character finds meaning in beauty in the things he left for her before he took his life, giving an idealistic and dangerous notion of self-harm, both of which could be detrimental to individuals struggling through similar life issues.

According to a 2022 study conducted by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, only one-fifth of films feature mental illness, and only 3% of adult characters experience a mental illness, a percentage hardly representative of the prevalence of mental illness in the world (Pieper et al.). In the United States alone, 29% of adults have been diagnosed with depression and 31% with anxiety, making the depictions on screen sorely lacking in representation (Pieper et al.). And of those minority, 78% of characters with a mental illness were displayed in a disparaging light, 18% showed their mental illness comedically, and 72% were perpetrators of violence (Pieper et al.). Examples of words used within the films to describe these characters were *crazy*, *unhinged*, *freak*, *hysterical*, *psycho*, *nuts*, and *weirdo*, among a slew of profanities (Pieper et al.). This study echoed similar findings of a 2018 study that focused on college students’ stereotypic views of mental illness. In *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, researchers Jessie M. Quintero Johnson and Julius Riles surveyed 359 college students with open-ended questions regarding the attributes of mentally ill fictional characters within the last

year, and the most prevalent theme across all media forms was that people with mental illness are unpredictable, violent, infantile, or unable to care for themselves. Based solely on television programs, mentally ill characters are ten times more likely to commit violent crimes than other character (Johnson and Riles).

Raymond Nairn, psychologist and professor for the University of New Zealand, divided media depictions of mental illness into only five categories, showing the narrow-minded focus of those creating media content (e.g., authors, screenwriters, and directors):

- Animal(ity) – an absence of moral or social restraints
- Damaged goods – mental illness derived from damage to the brain
- Incomplete – an amalgamation of mental illness and intellectual disability
- Out of control – destructive or unpredictably dangerous
- Possessed – being controlled by demons

In essence, Nairn described the depictions of mental illness in film and literature as a “qualitative distinction between ‘the mad’ and ordinary people, because madness is portrayed as less (animal, damaged) or other (out of control, possessed) than human” (144). Even children’s entertainment follows this same unfortunate trajectory. Research conducted at Queens University in Canada showed that a shocking 85% of Disney animated films referenced mental illness and 21% of their leading characters were referred to as mentally ill (Stuart). These characters, just like in films and television designed with adults in mind, are objects of amusement, disdain, and trepidation (Stuart).

Setting aside the homicidal and overtly violent portrayals of “madness,” fictional media also sends the message that there is no hope for those living with mental illness. Frequently, these characters are shown as marginalized, lacking in familial connections, occupations, and

identity (Stuart). Characters are often depicted as loners, further underpinning the isolation and dislocation that many real people suffering from mental illness already feel (Stuart). Fictional characters very rarely recover, reinforcing the belief that there is no hope for those diagnosed with a mental illness. Only 25% of characters in the 2022 study were shown to be in therapy and only 16% in treatment. This is an especially critical point where media can play a vital role in destigmatizing mental illness.

Literature

Most of the studies regarding mental illness and its negative portrayals within media are focused on television and film, but characterizations in literature have historically followed in this same course. Thankfully, however, since the early 2000s there has been an uptick in the publication of novels that feature mental illness and, along with the recent inclusivity and respect in language surrounding disability, the narratives seem to reflect this. Disability narrative theorist Arthur Frank developed three categories that all novels that feature mental illness fall into. A “narrative of restitution” features a character whose disability is cured; “narrative of chaos” is a snapshot of a significant disruption in a character’s life due to their illness; and a “quest narrative” shows a person managing their disability and living a healthy life. Diane Scrofano at Moorpark College completed a study in 2019 that analyzed fifty young adult novels published between 1998 and 2017; 1998 marked the publication of *Kissing Doorknobs*, which was the first young adult (YA) novel to show mental illness with treatment consistent with modern neurobiological approaches (8). Scrofano’s findings, using the model outlined by Arthur Frank, showed that most of the novels—twenty-six—fell in type two, Narrative of Chaos, but there was much overlap between types one and two. Type one featured thirty novels, but as many of them did not show clear “restitution” but rather an attempt and fail at restitution, they could be

classified as type two novels as well; twelve of the thirteen novels in type one showed characters denying their mental illness as their power over it spins out of control (Scrofano). The shortest category was type three which featured only eleven that emphasize recovery (Scrofano).

Schizophrenia

Of particular note in fiction is the use of schizophrenia. The world, both within media and the public in general, often refers to schizophrenia as “split personality” or even “Jekyll and Hyde personality,” making it, “the most misused psychological term in existence,” according to psychology expert Kieran McNally, who specializes in the history of psychiatry (69). With the publication of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1884 came the idea of Jekyll and Hyde personality, wherein an individual could have multiple personalities, though the term “schizophrenia” was not coined until 1911. Even since the beginning of its usage, the term has been rife with misunderstanding. In 1916, in the earliest known usage of the term outside of the medical profession, a journalist hypothesized that schizophrenia refers to a splitting of the soul and mind and that its origination comes from an individual “preserving their neutrality toward the warring nations” during World War I (70). Little more than a decade after the term was even coined, medical professionals were already misusing it and blaming the illness for crimes committed by individuals who very clearly did not have schizophrenia. In 1924, when two university students killed someone with the purpose of “committing the perfect murder,” multiple psychiatrists proposed that the perpetrators were suffering from “a pathological split personality.” They were reported as saying, “These split personalities may develop a psychosis—go crazy—that such psychoses are developed most frequently in the adolescent period—and such insane persons—schizophrenics—frequently commit crimes, even murder, without a motive” (72). Just like the journalist from 1916, these

psychiatrists were just as confused about the true nature of both schizophrenia and “split personality.”

Schizophrenia is categorically not split personalities. Informally speaking, split personality is actually referring to Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and yet even medical journals like a 1999 issue of *Neurogenetics* still gets it wrong, saying, “Schizophrenia, which is also called ‘split personality’ . . .” (75). If even medical professionals don’t understand such a complex and multifaceted illness, then serious misunderstandings and misconceptions are sure to abound within the lay community as well. Schizophrenia, according to the DSM-IV, is characterized by two or more of the following: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, disorganized or catatonic behavior, and/or negative symptoms, such as diminished speech or emotional expression (American Psychiatric Association 87). None of the symptoms correlate to either “split personality” or DID. Additionally, research shows that violent crime attributable to the schizophrenia spectrum of disorders is less than 10%, though substance abuse does increase this risk and most violent behaviors have been associated with paranoid ideation (Walsh et al.) At least understanding the illness itself and its prevalence is key in ensuring accurate writing of these characters.

I made it a point to incorporate these statistics into my novel, *Sins of a Son*, which opens with Tommy in a mental hospital. Despite the events that transpire before the book begins—he grapples with a police officer and is ultimately arrested—Tommy is very open to therapy, as shown by his session at the beginning of chapter one, and treatment. He discusses with his counselor, Dr. Parsons, the effects of his medication and his desire to continue treatment to live with his diagnosis of schizophrenia disorder. Though much of Tommy’s narrative would be classified as type two according to Arthur Frank’s categories of mental illness in literature, there

are aspects of both restitution and quest narratives as well. The bulk of the novel shows Tommy trying to live with his diagnosis and prove that he is capable of doing so while under the stress of living in his childhood home and his impending fatherhood.

The Asylum/Mental Institution in Fiction

Mental institutions in fiction are notoriously terrifying, often turning them into more of a haunted house or a prison than a place of healthcare, as is the case with media such as *American Horror Story: Asylum* (2013) and Netflix's *Side Effects* (2013). This infamous picture, complete with flickering lights, laughter emanating from the shadows, and malicious doctors with too-wide grins, is not only horrifying to audiences who wish to be horrified but it also sends a message of abuse and neglect that aligns with the appalling conditions that the mentally ill historically received. The first instance of a psychiatric facility in horror entertainment was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1921 silent German film directed by Robert Wiene. Though over a century old at this point, the film set a precedent that remains even today, one of sinister doctors and haunting facilities. In modern entertainment, in the horror genre specifically, the killer is often a sanatorium escapee (or even a "caretaker"), hellbent on murder, chaos, and destruction, and the facilities themselves appear to be straight out of a nightmare (Tzeses). This, even as a fictional story, calls into question the motives of psychiatric professionals and the field of psychiatry in general. Three overarching messages are shown in entertainment, especially horror entertainment, regarding mental health facilities and professionals.

The first of these messages is that mental hospitals in film and literature are overwhelmingly grimy and terrifying. John Goodwin, editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, completed an elaborate study on 55 films selected based on a keyword search for "mental/psychiatric hospital," "mental/psychiatric patient," and

“psychosis/psychoses,” all made between 2000 and 2012 (“The Horror of Stigma: Psychosis and Mental Health Care Environments in Twenty-First Century Horror Film (Part 2)”). Goodwin found that mental healthcare environments (MHCEs) in film are shown as antiquated, depicting images that are more in line with those from the turn of the twentieth century than those in modern times, highlighting such films as Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* franchise (2007), *Insanitarium* (2008), and *Asylum* (2008). These, among dozens of others within the study, show dirty, dingy patients and unsanitary, dilapidated equipment.

The second message sent to the public about MHCEs is that they can hold individuals against their will, as seen in *Gothika* (2003) and *The Ward* (2010), a practice that was done away with during the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s, with the establishment of the Community Mental Health Act (Rosenburg et al.). This act was based upon the social reform and the acknowledgement of basic human rights for the psychiatrically disabled (Rosenburg et al.). Prior to this, insane asylums *were* places that could hold people against their will, and they did. In addition to the neurologically disabled and handicapped, these facilities also housed the “morally insane,” people such as homosexuals, slaves who had run away or defied their masters, and women who were hypersexual or whose husbands had left them (Rosenburg et al.). Women could also be committed for the act of “displeasing” their husbands (Rosenburg et al.). Now, only on exceptionally rare cases can individuals be held against their will, and even then, they are not obligated to treatment (Congressional Research Service). Involuntary commitment laws are regulated by the Fourteenth Amendment’s Due Process Clause, ensuring that an individual’s rights are upheld and that atrocious acts from the past are not replicated. Despite this, mental facilities in horror media still looks far more like a prison or a concentration camp than an MHCE.

Lastly, MHCEs in horror involve a slew of human rights violations committed by therapists and healthcare professionals. Of the 55 films surveyed by Goodwin, 35.5% feature boundary violations by staff, 64.44% used restraints or straightjackets, 40% seclusion or locked rooms, 13.3% tasers/batons being used by staff, and 51.11% danger from staff not explicitly related to the treatment methods (“The Horror of Stigma: Psychosis and Mental Health Care Environments in Twenty-First Century Horror Film (Part 2)” Table 4. 228). The most common stereotype portrayed in these films was the evil doctor/nurse (Goodwin, “The Horror of Stigma: Psychosis and Mental Health Care Environments in Twenty-First Century Horror Film” (Part 2)). Often, in film, patients are used as “guinea pigs” for sinister medical experiments, which is historically accurate, such as with the widespread use of lobotomies in the early to mid-twentieth century. With the aforementioned Community Mental Health Act, President Kennedy sought to provide funding for community healthcare centers and further research into better mental health practices after his sister was permanently disabled from receiving a lobotomy at the age of 23 (Rosenburg et al.). Despite changes brought about by the mental healthcare conditions of modern time, the popular trope of the evil, nefarious doctor conducting experiments on their patients remains.

Though positive portrayals exist, more often than not, fictional media depicts mental illness in a negative light. By and large, the myths being propagated by fictional media are:

- *Those with mental illness are ten to twenty times more likely to commit a violent crime than their real life counterparts*; obviously, this is false. According to October Boyles, researcher and certified mental health and psychiatric nurse, people with mental illness are far more likely to be the victims of a violent crime than they are to commit them, and in the case of schizophrenia, which is often the

culprit in film, real world sufferers who do become violent typically do so out of fear and are more a threat to themselves than to others.

- *Those with mental illnesses look different.* In fiction, mentally ill characters are messy, unkempt, and dirty, with crazy, wild eyes and mannerisms, but, in reality, they look like ordinary people (Boyles). They *are* ordinary people; they aren't somehow "other" or physically different.
- *There is no hope.* Fictional characters rarely get help or treatment for their mental illness, reinforcing the false belief that there is no hope (Boyles).
- *Mental health hospitals are terrifying places that should be avoided.* Using tropes that have existed for over a hundred years, writers and filmmakers send the message that MHCEs have not improved whatsoever from the horrifying prison-like asylums of the nineteenth century, but, in actuality, modern facilities are built around many of the same standards that hospitals are, with the same laws they must follow (Tzeses).

In my novel *Sins of a Son*, the vocabulary surrounding both the therapy received as well as the facility itself was chosen specifically to destigmatize, showing the knowledgeable, respectful, and empathetic care by Tommy's therapist, Dr. Parsons, and his team. I have made sure to adhere to the American Psychiatric Association's professional best practices and built the fictional Creekside Memorial Mental Health Center to be a safe place that actually helped rehabilitate him. Though Tommy's condition does eventually deteriorate once again, it is ultimately not due to his mental illness at all and for a large portion of the book, he is shown living with his diagnosis and returning to his life as usual. The book also shows Tommy's girlfriend, Marlana, learning to trust and forgive him for his past. This, despite the novel's

overarching horror theme, hopefully shows audiences that there is hope for those diagnosed with a mental illness.

The Ugly: The Danger of Misrepresentation and Further Stigmatization

The question can then be posed, what is the harm in these negative (and overwhelmingly false) representations in fiction? It is fiction, after all, but the answer is simple enough. Though the storylines and the characters themselves are fictional, the stigmas associated with them are very real, as mentioned with the *magic window* effect. A study conducted by the National Mental Health Association concluded that 70% of the public bases their beliefs surrounding mental illness on what they see on television, even if what they are seeing is known to be fictionalized (Boyles). Furthermore, 63% of Americans get their information from family friends, which says that the perpetuation of false beliefs can take place inside of a vacuum, a very misinformed vacuum (Boyles). Pair this with the amount of television the average person consumes—American children alone will have spent roughly three school years of time watching television by the time they reach six years old (Stuart)—and the power of media cannot be overstated. Through the consumption of television—fictional or otherwise—films, and literature, each generation is learning how to think about the mentally ill, the terminology to use in reference to them, both good and bad, how to treat them, and how they can expect to be treated if they are one of the 25% of individuals who will ultimately be diagnosed with a mental illness in their lifetime (Stuart).

In the case of horror films specifically, where those with the mental illness are typically the purveyors of violence—chasing their families with an ax à la *The Shining* (1980), murdering helpless women like in *Psycho* (1960), or committing cannibalism like Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991)—it is unlikely that entertainment will cultivate sympathetic feelings

toward mental illness. Instead, further feelings of fear and stigma are generated with this sort of imagery (Goodwin, “The Horror of Stigma: Psychosis and Mental Health Care Environments in Twenty-First Century Horror Film (Part 1).”). An individual who has never encountered someone with schizophrenia, for instance, will only have the fictional portrayals they’ve seen to fall back on when it comes to basing their preconceived notions of the illness and those who live with it.

Media is able to cultivate misinformation about the mentally ill, emphasizing that individuals with mental disorders are dangerous, unpredictable criminals, which reinforces fear, mockery, and social rejection. With the language used and the vivid pictures painted by film and literature, the media has the power to either negatively or positively affect the mental health views shared by a people group. The more negative the message, the more stigmatizing it can be. These stigmas are further underpinned by a lack of understanding of mental illness by the general public. This ignorance surrounding mental illness can negatively affect relationships, foster an environment of discrimination, and contribute to the feelings of *otherhood* (Boyles).

In a 2011 study, Nicole Mossing Caputo and Donna Rouner studied exactly this idea. They examined the effects of fictional film narratives on 137 individuals and found that even though participants knew that their story was not real, the film did have the potential to influence social distancing behavior, such as prejudice and stereotyping. The study showed that the more familiarity the subject had with mental illness and the more closely aligned they felt with the main character, the less prejudicial behavior resulted (Caputo & Rouner). The researchers hypothesized that this correlation is due to the perceived realism of the aforementioned *magic window* (596). They specifically tested whether knowing the narrative was fictional or not played a role in influencing thoughts and actions, and the results showed that despite being told that the story was fictional, it was still able to influence belief change (596).

Not only does stigma influence the way individuals with mental illness are perceived by the rest of the world, but it influences the way these people see themselves as well. Negative stereotypes here can lead to further feelings of shame and isolation for those struggling with a mental illness (Nairn). Media images have the power to produce a negative self-image, thus limiting help-seeking behaviors and feelings of hope. If individuals feel as if there is no chance of recovery for them or that they'll be ostracized for their mental illness, then the likelihood of them reaching out for help or maintaining a treatment plan is greatly reduced (Nairn).

The Werther Effect

Suicide and self-harm behaviors shown in media have an even more potential for detriment. The Werther effect, named after the titular character in Johann Wolfgang van Goethe's 1774 novel *Sorrows of Young Werther*, refers to a rise in suicide and suicide-related behaviors following a highly-publicized suicide; the Werther effect remains just as strong whether the character in question is fictional or real ("What is the Werther Effect"). Following the release of *Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which Werther takes his own life quite graphically, copy-cat suicides were seen throughout Germany leading to Goethe himself stating, "My friends thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves and what occurred at first among a few, took place later among the general public" ("What is the Werther Effect").

The problem of suicide contagion may have been given a name following the book's release, but the idea had been around for centuries. Sociologist and social commentator Frank Furedi wrote that even Socrates spoke of the dangers of literature, calling it a drug—*pharmakon*—in reference to its power to either corrupt or cure, and the Greek dramatist Menander first proposed the use of trigger warnings as far back as the third century BCE.

Despite the millennia between these events and today, suicide contagion still remains an issue, with the most recent occurrence in literature being Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The 2007 bestselling novel received copious amounts of recognition and reproach for the truthful depiction of sexual assault and depression, but the greater cause for concern revolved around lead character Hannah Baker's suicide. The issue was not truly focused around the book itself, which featured a much less descriptive version of Hannah's suicide.

In the literary version, Hannah overdoses on medication, though the type of medication and the exact number of pills isn't specified. The 2017 *Netflix* series *13 Reasons Why*, however, shows an extremely graphic scene of Hannah cutting her wrists in a bathtub ("suicide of Hannah baker (trigger warning)"). Possibly even more heartbreaking is the scene that follows this, wherein Hannah's parents come into the bathroom to find her. Together, these scenes last over three minutes and feature graphic depictions of blood as well as close-ups on Hannah's face as she dies and her parents' as they tearfully attempt to pull her body from the overflowing bathtub.

Immense public outcry followed the show's release, with many saying that it glamorized suicide, as Hannah's character seemingly watched as her classmates and parents regretted their actions leading up to Hannah's death, yet another difference between the screen adaptation and the novel (Gilbert). Psychologists called the show "fundamentally irresponsible," and the National Association of School Psychologists and the New Zealand Office of Film and Literature released statements advising parents to moderate their children's viewing of the show (Gilbert). Amid the controversy, a 2019 study published within *The Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* by Jeffrey Bridge et al. proved the legitimacy of the public's concern, showing a 29.8% increase in adolescent suicides in the year following the show's release.

The Positive Power of Media

Some theorists have argued that this straightforward approach to blaming the media for public misconceptions of mental illness is problematic, bringing up the age-old “chicken or the egg” debate of whether life imitates art or art imitates life. There is some truth in this, as new media products are based on previous audience interactions—what has sold in the past will continue to sell in the future—making correlation between fiction and public perceptions a bit more nuanced. The two very much do influence one another. However, this “chicken or the egg” argument conveniently takes the blame away from media creators and denies the power of fiction that could be harnessed for education.

The media has great influence on the audience, as highlighted with the previous example of *13 Reasons Why*, but that influence is raw power; it is not inherently positive or negative. Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) shows the opposite side of the spectrum wherein the influence of media was used to positively impact society. The story follows Randle McMurphy, a prison inmate who avoids forced labor by feigning insanity, however, between electroshock therapy, the evil Nurse Ratched, and an eventual lobotomy, McMurphy is ultimately crushed by the same system he had previously been exploiting. Despite the negative implications of the mental hospital featured in the novel and, later, the film adaptation, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* illustrates the power of the entertainment industry. *The Telegraph* reported that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* has irreversibly changed the field of psychiatry (Swaine). The fictional story “irreparably tarnished the image of electroconvulsive therapy, or ECT, and quickened its departure from mainstream healthcare.” Furthermore, it helped institute the development of more effective and less invasive anti-psychotic drugs and treatment methods (Swaine).

Thankfully, there are many examples like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for writers to draw from for inspiration. What makes these works different from those that cast mental illness in such a negative light, these harmful narratives that continue to propagate stigma? In a nutshell, what sets these works apart from others is their focus on character first and sensitive handling of the subject matter says professional ghostwriter Richard Lowe. Works such as Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and the film *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) show mental illness in a much more humanistic light. In these stories, the characters have depth; they are people first and are not defined one-dimensionally by the characteristics of their illness. *Black Swan* (2010) too does a great job of showing that individuals with mental illness are not different from the rest of the population; they are professionals, artists, doctors, lawyers, teachers. Successful and respectful tales that incorporate mental illness do so by stepping away from the impersonal beliefs surrounding disability and instead focus their attention on intimate characterizations that enable the audience to be empathetic and understanding to the individuals rather than further ostracizing them.

Recent horror works, specifically, have bridged the gap between showcasing the difficulties of mental illness without casting the characters in a negative light, such as *The Babadook* (2014). In this film, the villain of the story is mental illness itself, with the lead character learning to live with it and understanding that she cannot run away from her own grief and loss. The film highlights how those suffering from mental illness are often ignored and doubted, and how those individuals can subsequently feel even more marginalized from society (Campbell-Jack).

It would be an easy answer then to say that we should simply avoid mental illness in fiction altogether, but instead, by harnessing the inherent power of media, writers can break

down the barriers of stigma and ignorance surrounding mental illness and help to paint a more nuanced, empathetic, and understanding approach to these disorders. We, as storytellers, have the unique ability to offer hope and insight to understanding the intricacy of mental health struggles. The media can initiate public debate, as with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or force the audience to look at their own prejudices and face them head on like *The Bell Jar*.

Guidelines for Safely Incorporating Mental Illness in Fiction

Writers must balance their writing between creating realistic, authentic characters while also avoiding any perpetuation of stigma, a trying task to say the least, especially considering the complex and intricate nature of mental illness and people in general. Writers can do this by being intentional and respectfully minded while writing. The first step in considerately incorporating mental illness in a story, according to writer Bethany Henry, is dedicated research. This should be the starting point for any writer regardless of the story they are telling but care is especially important here. Missing this step will only serve to cause harm to the very group being portrayed, and regardless of how well-meaning a writer may be, it will only result in furthering stigma and misinformation. A wealth of examples exist that highlight a lack of research, such as the misrepresentation of schizophrenia as split personalities or the insensitive use of “so OCD” for a person who simply likes order and cleanliness. Writers can consult with mental health professionals, read personal accounts and journals, as well as researching within the *DSM-5* to craft stories that inspire empathy (Henry).

This misuse of language here also highlights the importance of respectful word choices within writing. One of the easiest ways that a writer can maintain respectful language is to write “person first,” as in they write “a person with schizophrenia” rather than “schizophrenic.” The latter example implies that the person is defined by their mental illness rather than their

personhood (Henry). Also, writers should avoid using charged language like “crazy” or “nuts” where possible. Obviously, there are instances, depending on the story being told, where an author may want to draw attention to this stigma rather than shy away from it, but here it is necessary for the writer to determine the why behind their writing choices. Using words like “living with” rather than “struggling” or “battling” and “typical” instead of “normal” can invoke less of an emotional response in the reader and avoid harmful negative connotations (Henry).

Writers should also be thoughtful with the level of detail they put into descriptions, specifically in regard to suicide and self-harm. Following the 2019 study on *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Netflix* removed the elaborate suicide scene of Hannah Baker and extensively edited it, leaving less than a minute of screentime, none of which showed Hannah’s actual suicide, blood, or even close-ups of her face after her death (“Tape 7, Side A”). *Netflix* released a statement saying:

We have heard concerns about the scene from Dr. Christine Moutier at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and others, and have agreed with *Netflix* to re-edit it No one scene is more important than the life of the show and its message that we must take better care of each other. We believe this edit will help the show do the most good for the most people while mitigating any risk for especially vulnerable young viewers. (Kennedy)

Show writers also added additional precautions both at the beginning of the episode—“graphic depictions of violence”—and at the end, providing resources for suicide prevention, a measure they were praised for by suicide prevention advocates, like the American Association of Suicidology, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American School Counselor Association, Mental Health America, and the Trevor Project (Kennedy).

Suicide can be written in a story, but writers should take heed in ensuring that they do no harm by doing so. In 2013, the suicide prevention organization Samaritans paired with the Society for Authors to develop guidelines for safely writing suicide to mitigate the likelihood of the Werther effect. Based on their guidelines, certain details should be avoided, such as any romanticization of suicide as a sort of “release,” any type of “reward” that comes with the suicide or attempted suicide, such as bullies being remorseful or divorced parents reuniting; excessive details on the method of suicide or the suicide itself; depictions of suicide that show it as easy or painless; or even new or uncommon methods of suicide or self-harm (“Guidance for depictions of suicide and self-harm in literature”). The organization also advises authors to give trigger warnings at the beginning of their works so that readers can be informed on the story’s content before deciding to read it and mental health resources at the book’s conclusion.

Suicide is a far-reaching topic, touching the lives of 48% of the population (Cerel et al.), and, thus, requires a well-researched approach when including it in fiction. In the prologue of *Sins of a Son*, Tommy’s older brother Samuel commits suicide, an event that serves as a catalyst for the rest of the novel and all the terrifying events that follow in Tommy’s life. This was necessary to the story, as simply saying Tommy was living after the loss of his brother would not really show his struggle—or his brother’s, for that matter. But I adhered to the standards set forth by Samaritans and the Society for Authors. Samuel’s suicide is not glamorized whatsoever, and his panicked state of mind is shown leading up to his decision. There are no details of his actual death or when his body is recovered. The story, instead, focuses on the aftermath, what is left behind for Samuel’s mother and younger brother. Rather than showing any sort of “reward” for Samuel’s actions, instead, the audience sees firsthand how devastating one person’s actions were to the others in their life, a tragic fact that I am all too familiar with.

Sins of a Son was born out of my own childhood and my father's mental illness and subsequent suicide. Not only do I want to tell an authentic and compelling story, but it's important to me that I not add to the problem of prejudice by misguiding an audience on suicide, depression, schizophrenia, or mental illness treatment, both for destigmatization at a macro level but also for my own commemoration to my father's memory. Having grown up in a household with a man suffering from paranoid delusions for the vast majority of my life, I know firsthand how terrifying these accounts can be, both for the sufferer and for their loved ones who are forced to watch helplessly on the sidelines. My goal is that *Sins of a Son* terrify audiences, the primary goal of any horror writer, but not at the expense of any truthful and respectful mental health awareness. Just like the statement released by *Netflix* regarding *13 Reasons Why*, there is no one scene in my book that is more important the story as a whole.

At the surface, *Sins of a Son* may appear to violate the guidelines I have set forth so far in regard to writing mental illness respectfully in fiction, as Thomas is violent prior to the novel's opening. But being respectful to mental health does not mean that characters with mental illness should do no wrong or even that they cannot be the villain. Instead, writers need to consider why a character is violent. YA writer Cheryl Rainfield recommends that the author never blame a character's violence on the mental health issue. Ensure that the use of a character's mental illness isn't simply a tool or writing device to make their violence happen; not only does this perpetuate stigma, but it is lazy writing (Mikalsen). Dig deeper into the current situation or the character's background in order to show a more in-depth reason for their violent outbursts. In *Sins of a Son*, Tommy does become violent, both in events prior to the novel's opening and at the end of the novel, however, both of these instances revolve around fear and not the character's diagnosis.

Lastly, writers should always seek to utilize a sensitivity reader. This can be mental health professionals and/or individuals who have experience with a similar sort of mental illness themselves. This can serve to ensure a story's accuracy while also maintaining a level of respect and sensitivity that may not be obtained otherwise (Henry). Much like research, this is a critical step to any sort of writing that could offend or add further stigma to an already stigmatized topic.

Mental illness is a topic that touches everyone in some way, whether that be through their own struggles or that of a friend or loved one. With 25% of people diagnosed in their lifetime, it is clear that mental illness is a prevalent issue, from the most prevailing like depression and anxiety to those seen less frequently in real life like schizophrenia and DID. It is hard enough for individuals to come forward and seek help for these types of illnesses without the media exacerbating the problem and further stigmatizing mental health concerns. Writers have the power with every keystroke to either help reduce stigma or strengthen it, to "do no harm" or make life harder on individuals who may already feel marginalized. Through thorough research, intentionality, mindfulness, and the implementation of sensitivity readers and trigger warnings, writers can ensure that their work tells a compelling story while also maintaining a level of accuracy and respect that is far too often missing in fiction media.

Sins of a Son

By Jacequlyn Mills

Prologue

“Leave me alone!”

His voice cracked as he screamed into the black void behind him, the cold December wind barely registering against his bare arms. He had to escape, to flee from the sound of his mother’s words still ringing in his ears and the wailing of his little brother from the closet. His neck burned, the skin rubbed raw from the tangled grip of his collar as she’d clung to him, begging him to stay. She was trying to help, as she always did, attempting to make herself heard over the cacophony that never left his head, but it was no use. Not anymore.

Tommy. Samuel fought against the sting of tears remembering his brother’s terror-stricken face, searching for him as their mother shoved him inside, past the hanging flannels and into the makeshift bed on the floor. It was the only way they had to protect him.

Tonight, the voices amplified, grappling for power until the victor sent him scrambling out into the night. He vaguely remembered tearing the front door from its hinges as he ran from the faces haunting him, from the shadows of his living room, leering and mocking.

Hands reached out from the darkness as he stumbled through the knee-high field of old corn stalks. They clawed out like fingers, slapping at his arms and legs and rustling whispers on the breeze. The voice called out behind him, soft but persistent; it trembled through his bones and rattled the fillings in his teeth, consuming his mind in the same way it always had.

Saaaammuel...

He whipped around, his sweat-soaked hair cold against his cheek as he searched for it, the monster in the darkness, the man with the faces, so many faces. The wind howled, blowing crisp leaves up into a swirl that spiraled around him, pricking his skin with dust and pebbles and filling his nose with cold December air.

Samuel.

Samuel.

You know what to do.

Samuel.

A dozen voices, some he knew, some he didn't, whispered to him through the swaying trees, though the wind, and hanging on the air itself. Slapping at his ears, swatting out the buzzing of words and the memories rising unbidden in his mind.

It wasn't him, Samuel.

Not him, Samuel.

It's you.

“Shut up!”

He knew the truth, knew it without the denigrating rasp in his mind telling him so, and just as much, he knew he'd screwed up. He'd done the only thing he knew to do, and it was the wrong answer.

It's always you.

He looked down and, in the pale glow of the gibbous moon, saw the blood, thick and sticky, coating him from fingertip to elbow. He screamed and clawed at his skin, trying to wipe the evidence of his discretion from his body in a way he couldn't from his thoughts, but it wouldn't budge, as much a part of him now as the voice in his head.

When one bare foot slipped into a hole, Samuel hit the frozen ground hard enough to clack his teeth together and spill a haze of dancing lights in front of his vision. He blinked, dazed for only a moment before claws brushed the back of his neck and ice spilled down his spine. His name sounded in his ears again.

Using an elm stump to push himself off the ground, he hobbled toward the towering shape in the distance, silhouetted against the inky black sky. He tasted metal in his mouth as he clenched his teeth together, willing the shaking of his limbs to stop and his feet to move him forward. His chest burned from sucking in the bitter air, but he couldn't stop. Not now.

He didn't falter as he reached the silo and wrapped his shaking hands around the cold bars embedded into the stone. Pinching his eyes shut and focusing on each rung rather than the evil behind him, he climbed. It was all around him now. He didn't have to open his eyes to know. It wedged into every nook and cranny of his mind, filling the vacancies like smoke.

Thirty-three. Thirty-four. Thirty-five.

The wind pressed in on him, wrapping its cold hands around his neck as he climbed, counting each rung, knowing exactly how far it was to the top.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

A handhold ripped out of the wall in his grasp, and he slipped, his heart lodged somewhere between his chest and his mouth. He caught himself on the next rung, and seconds passed before he heard the broken one clank to the ground beneath him and he forced his hand to grab the next, and the next, moving him ever upward.

Seventy-seven. Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine.

He reached the top and scraped his elbows against the concrete as he pulled himself up, swaying on the two feet of flat space on the silo's roof before the pointed pitch at the center. He righted himself with a dry swallow, a determined resignation to fight back in the only way he knew how, even as the wind licked around his face, whispering in the voice he knew as well as his own. A cackle rang through the darkness. Balancing as best he could on the thin ledge, Samuel turned to face the house, the house that called to him like a siren's song, an impulse that

felt both ancient and innate, a danger he knew he should run away from but was powerless to its magnetic pull. The old homestead on the back forty-three acres of their property stood on a hill overlooking the silo, empty as it had been for the last forty years, but the orange glow of candles crackled through the panes nonetheless, just as Samuel knew it would.

And there it was, the face of the monster in the flickering candlelight of the top left window. He shouldn't be able to see it from this distance, but Samuel could make out the coal-black of its eyes and gleaming teeth through the darkness. The voice was loud and clear, as if it were standing right beside him rather than on the other side of the field.

“You belong to me, Samuel.”

He couldn't speak as the reality of that statement washed over him. The all-consuming weariness tightened around his neck like a noose.

It was right. It had always been right. He had fought for years, had tried to outrun it, but the truth stared back at him from above the remnants of last season's corn crop.

He could fight it, but he would never win.

He could run, but he would never escape it.

The last semblance of hope leached from his mind, sucked from his chest and poured into the air around him in a puff of condensation with his sob. He pinched his eyes shut once last time and thought of his brother.

“I'm sorry, Tommy,” he whispered. Then he stepped off the ledge and into the empty air.

Chapter One

“How are you feeling right now, Thomas?”

Tommy turned his attention from the window, from the wave of heat radiating off the hot pavement of the parking lot, back to Dr. Parsons's face. He'd long since stopped correcting the doctor on his preferred name. He'd only ever been *Thomas* to his teachers, and now, more than ten years since he last sat in a classroom, the only person who called him that was his mother . . . and his therapist. The man's aftershave was overwhelming, and that, paired with the trepidation about returning to his normal life, had Thomas's gut churning so much he feared the morning's bowl of overcooked oatmeal would make a reappearance.

"Fine."

Dr. Parsons smiled the same knowing smile he'd been giving him for the last three months. "I thought we agreed to be honest."

Tommy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and sighed. "I'm terrified."

"Of what, exactly?"

"Me."

"You don't feel like you've changed at all? You haven't learned better ways to cope?"

"No, I have, but here, I feel . . ." Tommy's eyes returned to the window. The heavy sunlight streaming through the glass warmed his skin as he considered what exactly made him so uneasy. "Here, I feel like I have more control. But, out there, what if I lose it all again?"

There was a soft *clink* against the desk beside him, and when he turned his focus from the window, Dr. Parsons had removed his glasses. "Thomas," he said, resting his elbows on his desk and steepling his fingers in front of his chin, "you've done so well here. When you first came to us after your incarceration, you were a shell of the man I see before me now. Don't let your fear hold you back from living. You have to trust in yourself."

Tommy swallowed and dropped his gaze to the floor. He'd never been able to take compliments well—not that he had much experience with them to begin with—but the sincerity in Dr. Parsons's expression made him feel that much more unworthy of it.

With a heavy sigh, Dr. Parsons said, “We have a saying in the medical community, Thomas, and I think it could be useful to you. Have you ever heard of Occam's Razor?”

Tommy had already collected a lifetime's worth of “helpful sayings” from his time at Creekside Memorial Mental Health Center, but it was probably rude to say so, so he shook his head.

“No? Well, the saying goes, ‘When you hear hooves, think horses not zebras.’ It's used primarily to show new physicians that they should consider the most common explanation first. However, in your case, I think it could be used during those times when you struggle to differentiate between what's real and what's only in your mind. When you have those breaks with reality, you can remind yourself to stop and consider your options. ‘Is it more likely that what I'm seeing is real or that my mind is playing tricks on me?’” Dr. Parsons pursed his lips for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. “I think,” he continued, “if you focus on two things during those episodes, then perhaps it will serve as a sort of totem, a tether to reality.” He held up one finger and asked, “Can you touch it?” before adding a second. “And is it rational?”

Tommy considered this for a moment, and though he could understand why the doctor would assume this to be helpful, he was a bit more skeptical. From his experience during those instances, rationality wasn't a concept he had the ability to grasp. Images began to trickle into his mind, hallucinations that had seemed so real to him at the time—black eyes staring back from the shadows, blood on the walls, invisible hands scratching at his skin—but he was able to will them away, a major improvement from the torrent of intrusive thoughts he'd had months ago.

Maybe I am getting better, he thought with a small surge of pride, an emotion he couldn't remember having felt much before his time here.

"But that being said," Dr. Parsons continued, "you've responded well to the aripiprazole, and you haven't had an episode since you've been here. I think we're safe in assuming that you'll see even more improvements so long as you continue to take your medication and maintain your sessions with me once you're back to your normal routine."

Tommy didn't like the idea of being on medication, but it sure as hell was better than the alternative. He nodded again, feeling, for the first time in days, the slight loosening of the tension in his chest. Maybe he could do this. It wasn't like he could spend the rest of his life hiding from the world, and though he hated himself for thinking about it, his mind returned to the last night he'd seen Laney, streaks of tears cutting across her cheeks, her shrill scream ringing in his ears. Tommy dropped his gaze to the floor, wanting nothing more than to forget that he'd ever hurt her. But these images were much harder to push away, heavy-laden with regret and shame as they were.

"So, Thomas, I'll ask you one more time before you leave us. How are you feeling?"

Tommy looked up, meeting Dr. Parsons's spectacled gaze, and pushed the painful memories of Laney from his mind. He owed it to her to be a better man, and even though he would never be worthy of her, he had to try. He had to do whatever it took to show her that he'd changed. There was no other choice, really. He sighed and felt the bare beginnings of a smile tug at the corners of his lips. "Better," he said, and he actually believed it.

Until he stood to leave and watched his mother's station wagon pull into the parking lot.

Tommy untucked his sheets from around the mattress, folded them, along with the scratchy hospital blanket, and laid them on the foot of his bed. He packed up his meager belongings, a few changes of clothes, his toothbrush and a razor—a *safety* razor, of course, complete with a tiny blade that made it impossible for anyone to hurt themselves with—and the tattered, old King James Bible his mother had brought for him on one of her visits. He'd spent far more time reading the family tree information in the front than he did any of the words in red.

“Heard you’s leavin’ us, Tom?”

He looked up to see Peasy, his holey, graying teeth fully on display as he smiled up at Tommy from the doorway. There was no way of knowing how old Peasy was; the same methamphetamine addiction that turned his teeth to ash had landed him in a nuthouse and also made his skin look like yellowed tissue paper. If he had to guess, Tommy would have put him somewhere between forty and seventy-five.

“It’s Tommy, and yes, I’m leaving.” He picked up his bag, slinging the strap across his shoulder and started for the door. He supposed that he should take a moment to reflect on his time spent in this room—after three months here, he should probably actually feel something—but he didn’t really see the point. Tommy only felt nauseous, but that could have been the way Peasy was scratching his scraggly beard and leering at him from the doorway.

“You got anything you can come off of?”

“The same stuff you’ve got, Peas. A cheap razor and clothes.” Tommy pushed past him, the smell of urine assaulting his senses as Peasy shambled away, muttering, his rubber-bottom socks squeaking across the floor with every step.

Tommy walked through the dayroom, and not one of the regulars looked up. They were all too focused on whatever Dr. Phil was talking about on the television at the front of the room. Except for Warren. He sat as he always did, tapping away on the wall beside his chair, his fingers stopping their ministrations every so often to rub softly on the bumps and ripples across the concrete blocks.

As Tommy stopped at the sliding window by the main exit to fill out the last of his paperwork, an older woman sidled over to the glass and smiled brightly as she unhooked the lock. The woman, Nurse Judy, slid the glass out of the way and said, "I'm happy you're going home, sweetheart, but I'll sure miss your handsome face 'round here." She reached through the window after sliding his paperwork through, along with his phone, car keys, and wallet, and squeezed his hand.

There's something about nurses' hands, Tommy thought. They're always ice cold.

He patted hers in return and smirked. "Oh, I'm sure Peasy will make you forget all about me."

Nurse Judy rolled her eyes with a *harrumph*. "I swear if that old coot tries to grab my tail again, I'ma wallop him with this clipboard."

Tommy chuckled. Most of the people at Creekside were fine. Some of them, like Peasy, had been a thorn in his side for the last three months. Unfortunately, those like Nurse Judy were extremely rare. She was kind, and it was obvious from the way she treated the residents that her kindness was genuine. But she wasn't a woman to be trifled with. She stood just a few inches shorter than Tommy, but she was solid brick. He had no doubt whatsoever that the clipboard would be the least of Peasy's problems if he crossed Nurse Judy.

“I’m not sure if that’s charged,” she said, nodding toward the phone in his hands. “Do you need me to call anybody to pick you up?”

Tommy thought back to the moss green station wagon waiting for him in the parking lot.

“Thank you, but my mother’s already outside.”

Nurse Judy told him how proud she was of him and squeezed his fingers again before buzzing him out the front door.

He should be happy. His mother was here to take him home. But all he could think about was the very clear statement that Laney was making by not being the one to pick him up. She hadn’t written him back at all, hadn’t answered a single phone call. He chastised himself for having hoped for any other outcome. After everything he’d put her through, why would she be here? His heart sank even further as he stepped into the heat of the summer sun and wondered which *home* he’d even be returning to.

Before allowing that thought to run rampant, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had no control over any of that. Not now. Not while he’d been here, but he promised himself—and Laney in the countless letters he’d written her—that he would fix everything once he was out. Now, he had to put his money where his mouth was, as Peasy was so wont to say during every poker game—though there’d never been any money and Tommy certainly hadn’t been running his mouth.

“Thomas!”

He opened his eyes and saw his mother barreling toward him from the parking lot. Before he had time to greet her in response, she was wrapping her arms around his neck and crushing herself to him. “My sweet boy! I’ve missed you so much,” she said as she squeezed him tighter.

Despite everything—their countless issues and the difficult conversations he knew would be coming up at some point, the fact that it was *her* here instead of the woman he loved—Tommy couldn't stop the swell of his heart at seeing his mother. Her salt-and-pepper curls tickled his nose as he hugged her, and the smell of his childhood wrapped around him.

Along with the scent of butterscotch and White Rain, came the memories—his mother's shouting, his own sobbing from the floor of the closet—and, just like his feelings as he stepped out of the clinic, he shut the memories down, locking them safely back into the box where he liked to keep them so he could pretend they didn't exist. He was sure Dr. Parsons would have something to say about his coping mechanisms but, right now, Tommy just wanted to get out of the parking lot without causing a scene.

His mother took a step back, but her hands still clutched his arms, taupe fingernails gripping him just above the elbows. The lines on her face seemed heavier than they'd been only months ago, as were the dark circles she'd always worn like a badge of honor, but her wide smile, the way her eyes lit up when she saw him, that was sincere.

"I missed you too, mom," he said, and he realized as the words left his mouth that he meant it. The anger he'd been feeling toward her over the last four months—or four years, for that matter—was unfounded. Dr. Parsons had told him as much, that he couldn't blame his mother for her own untreated mental illness.

"She's trying the best she can with the tools that she's been given, Thomas."

He reminded himself as he dropped a kiss to her cheek that his problems, though she'd certainly had a hand in making them, were not his mother's fault nor were they her responsibility to fix.

She pulled back and gave him a once-over that all women somehow learn how to do when they become mothers.

“Have you been sleeping? You look like hell.”

Eddie Buckley was many things. A punch puller was not one of them.

“Thanks, Ma,” he said with a grin.

Her gaze dropped to his stomach as she shook her head. “Well, they sure don’t feed folks in there, do they? You barely even have a shadow.” Her thick Tennessee accent made the word come out *shada*.

Tommy laughed. “I’m fine. I doubt I’ve even lost a pound.”

“Oh, rubbish,” she said, waving a dismissive hand as she threaded her other through his arm and pulled him toward her car. “Come on, I’ll get you fed as soon as we get home.”

Home.

The word hit him like a truck, knocking into his chest and rattling around in the emptiness there, settling into his bones as they walked across the pavement. His mother was still talking about the weight she was sure he’d lost, but he could barely hear her. Just that one word was enough to squash the small bit of relief he’d felt, that singular shred of normalcy. He was going home. Not to his home, the one he’d shared with Laney, but the one he’d grown up in. Seeing it in his dreams was bad enough, but now, he’d be back there, reliving it all, face to face with his demons.

In more ways than one.

He took a heavy breath and opened the door, plastering a smile back on his face as his mother rambled on about people he’d never even met.

Twenty minutes later, they rounded the corner of Roundtree Lane, and Tommy's childhood home came into view. He reminded himself, as they pulled into the driveway, that it was just a house. Just brick and mortar and forty-year-old wood. But all the same, he couldn't help the momentary cold that washed over him as his mother dropped the car into park and switched off the engine.

He hadn't been here in over a year. Even before his incarceration, the tension between his mother and himself had been too great, and at the time, he'd hoped that staying away from the home that frequented all of his worst nightmares would make them go away. But, of course, like many of his best laid plans, it hadn't worked. With all the fortitude he could muster, Tommy stepped out of the car and resolved himself to his current situation.

Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . .

Well, Rayf would be happy to know that the Serenity Prayer had wedged itself in Tommy's brain so deeply that it popped up when he needed to hear it most. Rayford Moore, the leader of Tommy's mandatory Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, was fond of quoting it at least twenty-five times during each sitting.

Instead of the painful memories embedded in the house's very foundation, Tommy took note of all the much-needed repairs around the property as he pulled his bag from the back seat—the thigh-high grass obscuring the first few inches of the robin's-egg-blue vinyl siding, the peeling paint on the shutters, the split oak on the property's left side.

“What happened to the tree?” Tommy asked, lifting his chin toward the splintered wood when his mother gave him a quizzical look. The tree was cracked almost to the base, with—thankfully—the side furthest from the house leaning haphazardly away and a wide streak of blackened, burnt wood running up the center. “Lightning hit it?”

His mother nodded. “Last fall. Been meaning to get it cleaned up before the whole blasted thing comes through my roof, but my back ain’t what it used to be.”

Despite his mother’s chuckle, Tommy felt a stab at her comment. The house was falling apart around her, and there wasn’t much she could do about it these days. The tree had been ready to break off at the roots for going on a year, and Tommy should’ve been here to take care of it for her. Just like the weeds poking up from the sides of her flowerbeds and around the house. He started to say he’d take care of it for her when the screen door slapped shut, and he realized he was alone in the front yard. No matter what kind of skeletons lay buried in his family’s closets, his mother deserved better than this. Swallowing down the shame that threatened to overtake him, Tommy finished the prayer in his mind.

The courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

He could do nothing about the last couple years and the strain his distance had caused on his mother, but he could fix it now. But his fortitude threatened to crumble once again as he followed her inside.

Like stepping into another time, Tommy walked through the door of his childhood home. It didn’t matter that he had a two-day beard or that he’d lived outside of the confines of this house for over a decade, it never failed. The moment his foot crossed over the threshold, he was ten years old again. The nerves he’d worn like a scarf for the majority of his life settled around him and his whole body tensed. He felt like he was waiting at the precipice for the rollercoaster to drop, the same way he’d felt almost every waking moment in this house.

He half expected, as he glanced at his reflection in the golden-rimmed mirror hanging on the wall behind the door, to see the pre-pubescent gap-toothed version of himself staring back at

him, but of course, the Tommy in front of him was more than twenty years older than that little boy, with faint traces of gray on either side of what had once been only chocolate brown.

He'd hoped that the years away from this house would have left nothing but nostalgia in its wake, a feeling of sweet reminiscence, but that had been a silly notion, really. There was nothing *sweet* about anything he had to recollect in this house. Any nostalgia he could have felt in his childhood home was tainted by an undercurrent of painful memories, memories that were entirely too vivid as he took in a living room that hadn't changed at all in over twenty years.

The same musty smell of cigarette smoke and dust hung in the air, and the taupe carpet was just as it had always been. Every detail, down to the arrangement of the furniture, remained unchanged, as if time stood still inside these four walls. The same floral couch sat along the far wall with the mismatched loveseat forming an L-shape beside it, all atop the rug his mother purchased at a yard sale the same summer that twelve-year-old Tommy had broken his arm. An oil lamp hung from a hook in the corner across from the couch, the crying face of Mary in the center.

Tommy couldn't help but wonder what other people saw when they came into this house—not that they'd had many visitors over the years, save Pastor Loretta and the rest of the congregation. He wondered if every home was wrapped in the same intricate pattern of memories, knotted and tangled into the bones of the house like kudzu vines.

He couldn't look at that floral couch without remembering the way he'd cowered behind it, and the rain lamp in the corner, one of his mother's most prized possessions, had never looked like the mother of Jesus, not in the way Tommy imagined her. When it was on, the oil fell down the wires surrounding Mary, coursing over them in a steady stream of beads, but the light above her head contorted her simple expression of pain and grief at the loss of her son into a twisted

macabre grimace, one that had never failed to terrify him as a child. He almost averted his eyes, but instead, he chastised himself for still fearing it. He used the technique he learned from Dr. Parsons and stared at it head-on, refusing to be frightened by mere metal and glass.

“You’ll be staying in your old bedroom,” his mother said as she set her purse on the floor beside the couch and then used her foot to slide it beneath the end table, the same place she’d kept it for as long as Tommy could remember.

Of course he’d be staying in his old room. There were only two other rooms in the house, one was hers and the other was Samuel’s. It didn’t matter that Samuel had been gone for almost twenty years; Tommy knew everything in his room would be just as unchanged as the rest of the house. Samuel’s clothes still hung in the closet, his shoes still sat by the bed. Hell, Tommy was certain if he went in there to look right now, the bedside table would look just as it had on the night that Samuel left, adorned with the same half-empty pack of Marlboro Reds and discarded gum wrappers, all of them neatly rolled into tight little silver balls. They didn’t touch Samuel’s things. Tommy had tried, once, to ask his mother if he could move into the bigger room.

“*That’s your brother’s room, Thomas,*” she’d told him. “*You know that.*” The shocked look she’d given him for even bringing it up left no room for argument, and Tommy had never mentioned again.

“I put all your things in there months ago.”

He paused, abandoning thoughts of his room and turned to follow his mother into the kitchen.

“My things? What things?” he asked.

She stood, her head popping up over the refrigerator door. “All your stuff from that girl’s house.”
That girl.

That girl he'd been living with for two years.

That girl he'd been in love with for well over three.

"Marlena." He tried to keep the anger out of his tone. He knew it would do no good to start this argument now. They'd fought about Laney since the moment she became a part of his life, and there was nothing he could say now that would change his mother's mind.

"Yes. Her," was all she said. Her voice was curt as she turned her attention back to the contents of the fridge. "I've got some pork chops thawed out. Is that okay for—"

"How did you get all my stuff? Why?" He wasn't even sure how it could all fit into his old bedroom. It hadn't been *her* house, it had been *theirs*. He and Laney had found the house together, put down the money together—though it was all in her name since she actually had credit to speak of—and filled it full of *their* things. His *things* should have been an entire house worth of stuff.

His mother huffed as she closed the fridge, as if explaining to him all the ways he'd upended his own life was some sort of bother for her. "About two weeks after you were arrested, I came home to find your truck in the drive and a bunch of boxes on the porch. I opened one up just to make sure what I was seeing was right, and it was." She waved a hand in the air as she rolled her eyes. "She'd just thrown everything in there like she didn't even care if it all ended up broke or not. Really goes to show what kind of—"

"Did you talk to her?"

"No, I didn't. Nor will I. That little harlot has made it perfectly clear how she feels about the both of us, and—"

"Don't call her that," Tommy snapped, unable to quell the anger rising up in his chest.

His mother's eyes cut quickly back to his, and she pursed her lips. "If it looks like a jezebel and quacks like a jezebel, it sure ain't a duck, son."

Tommy closed his eyes, clenching his teeth together to keep from losing his temper. When he opened them, his mother had already begun pulling stuff from the fridge, a clear indication that the conversation was over. He glanced past her at the row of hooks beside the backdoor and saw his own keys dangling there, unmistakable even from across the room by his blue Titans keychain. He stalked past his mother and snatched his keys from the hook.

"Where are you going?"

He took another breath before turning back around to face her and found her brows furrowed, as if the answer to her question wasn't obvious to the both of them. "Mom, I love her. She's a good woman no matter what you think of her, and I'm going to do everything in my power to get her back."

She sighed, and it was the most infuriating sound. She shook her head and her voice dropped. Perhaps, just as Tommy felt like a child again the moment he crossed the threshold into the house, his mother mistook him for his ten-year-old self, as well. "She's not worth your time. When are you going to see that? She's trash, son. Common trash."

For whatever reason, *this* had been the complaint his mother rested upon. This had always been what she said to him, as if Laney were somehow beneath him, an idea that was entirely laughable. Laney's father didn't run out on them when she was a child. None of Laney's siblings had killed themselves, choosing their own selfishness over the feelings of those who loved them. Laney's mother wasn't a manipulative psychopath who believed their family to be cursed by the devil. How his mother could rationalize that the Buckley family was above *anyone* was testament enough to her state of mind.

“Are you insane?” His mirthless bark of laughter rang out across the small kitchen, bouncing off the cabinets much louder than he realized.

His mother took a step away from him, her face drained of color. He’d never talked to her this way, but if he was going to be the man he should be, he would have to start at the root, to carve the cancer out at its source. “She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. She is the *only* good thing I’ve got. The only thing in my life worth having.”

His mother’s eyes teared up as she understood the clear subtext of what he was saying, but she sniffed rather than let them fall. She lifted her chin and asked, “And then what? You just gonna leave me again?”

He jerked his head back, frowning. “Leave you again? What do you—”

“You just gonna leave me too?”

Laney had told him for years that his mother was jealous, that the animosity between the two of them was due to her resentment at Laney for having taken her son away, but Tommy had never believed her. But now, with his mother teary-eyed in front of him asking him if he was going to leave her, he thought Laney’s suspicions were more accurate than he originally thought.

“Leave you? You mean, move out and start a family of my own? Yes! Yes. That’s exactly what I’m going to do. Because that’s what people *do*. Jesus, mom.” He turned around, running his fingers through his hair as he fought the urge to just leave, to run away and not have to deal with her emotional baggage anymore. It was never ending.

The exhaustion of the day caught up to him, weighing him down like beaten clothes on a line. He’d been tiptoeing around her his entire life, never wanting to upset her, never wanting to say the wrong thing, never wanting to hurt her. But he couldn’t do that anymore. With a heavy sigh of resignation he turned back to face her.

Her tears finally spilled over, rolling down her cheeks as she hugged her arms around her chest. For the first time in his life, maybe he understood her, understood a bit more the complexity of this strange and cumbersome dynamic they'd always had. He saw her not as she was now, loose gray curls and frail hands, and not as she appeared in most of his childhood memories, solid, with the strength and persistence of the tide. Just as pernicious as the need for control that he'd attributed his mother's behavior to and the jealousy that Laney always thought it was, maybe the underlying issue was actually loneliness.

Looking at her now, tears fresh on her cheeks and her lips pinched into a thin line, she reminded him of the night when they'd found Samuel's body, crumpled and broken at the base of the silo on the back forty. On the many nights when she'd wake up screaming, when he'd held her as if she were the child and he the parent, the adolescent watcher in the dark. He saw her as he'd seen her during the times they'd clung to one another in the closet, Tommy clutching her shirt as they both trembled from the monsters waiting just outside the door.

He swallowed, willing his own tears to recede. He couldn't allow her to manipulate him, and he couldn't allow her to control his life. But he couldn't hurt her either. She didn't deserve that. The look on her face as they loaded him into the ambulance was forever etched into his memory. She had appeared so fragile, so brittle, standing there watching helplessly as the paramedics stitched him together and the officer read him his rights, as if the slightest wind would have scattered her across the field. He took a step closer to her. Her chin quivered, and he realized how hard this life had been on her too.

"I'm never going to leave you, Mom," he said, his shoulders sagging beneath the weight of the past. "Not like they did."

Chapter 2

Tommy's heart quickened as he pulled into his driveway—*Laney's driveway*, he reminded himself bitterly. It wasn't exactly *his* anymore. The stack of boxes now sitting in his childhood bedroom proved that. He'd hoped Laney would be at home, but as his tires crunched across the gravel, he couldn't stop the nervous feeling rising in his gut at the sight of her powder-blue Civic parked beside the house.

After pulling his keys from the ignition, he wiped his palms on the front of his jeans and got out. What was the proper etiquette for entering one's own house after being kicked out of it? Looking down at the keys in his hand, he noticed that his own house key was missing from the ring, not that it would be right to just unlock the door and barge in.

His steps faltered at his next thought. What if she was in there with someone else? He couldn't possibly expect her to wait around for him to get his life together. Why would she? She was smart, interesting, beautiful. Tommy knew all too well the way men looked at her, he'd been one of them himself four years ago, watching her sway to the music at Keller's Bar surrounded by a group of her friends. He hadn't been able to look away, and it took him three songs and another two shots before he was even able to approach her. As nervous as he'd been, making his way across the bar to where she stood, but some drunk bumped him, sloshing the drink he bought for her all over his hand. He thought he salvaged it, turning around before she'd ever looked in his direction, but five minutes later, he sat mulling over how stupid he'd been to think he stood a chance, and she sat down beside him and introduced herself, a small smirk playing on her lips as she nodded toward the half-empty drink and asked if it was for her. He had no idea what made her stay and spend the night talking with him, but he hadn't wanted to question it. And three years later, they'd been living together while Tommy saved for a ring . . . until he

botched the whole thing, of course. But she wouldn't be nearly as understanding this time around. If she hadn't already moved on.

Unbidden, the images rose in his mind like a growing tide. Some other man spinning her around the kitchen while Conway Twitty crackled from the record player. Some other man's words lighting up her eyes and making her head fall back as she laughed in the way that only she could. Some other man's arms on either side of her waist, boxing her in as she did dishes. Some other man's lips on her neck.

He clenched his fist around the keys in his hand, trying to stop the irrational beast of jealousy clawing inside his chest. He had no right to be upset. She wasn't *his*, not anymore, no matter how much he wanted her to be.

With a deep breath, he walked onto the porch and lifted his fist, but the door opened before he had a chance to knock. Her hair was tied up, wrapped into a messy bun on the top of her head with a few stray strands of blonde falling around her face. As she stared at him wide-eyed, Tommy felt a surge of pride at the Allman Brothers t-shirt she wore over her yoga pants. *His* Allman Brothers t-shirt, knotted to fit but still hanging loose on her much smaller frame.

"Tommy," she said, barely more than an exhale.

He hated it, that wary look in her eyes, but he couldn't blame her for it. She shifted, rearranging her work clothes and boots she held in front of her as she reached behind her to shut and lock the door.

"I was just heading out." She started to step by him, but he moved, holding up a hand to stop her.

"Can we talk?"

Her gaze met his, blue as ice and just as cold., “We don’t have anything to talk about.” She tried to step around him again, and Tommy fought the urge to touch her. After their last night together, he was certain that was the last thing she wanted.

He refrained from reaching out for her but was powerless to stop the pleading sound of his voice as she walked past him.

“Please.” She made it to the edge of the porch , when he added, “Laney, I’m trying.”

She spun, two patches of pink blooming on her cheekbones. “You’re trying? Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

Tommy blinked, taken off guard by her sudden anger, though he shouldn’t be. He deserved every bit of the venom in her words. “I—well, yeah, I—”

“I thought you were going to die, Tommy. You have no idea what that felt like! No idea. So—” She looked away from him, clenching her eyes shut for a second before turning back to face him. Her expression was hard once again, she took a deep breath before she said, “So, don’t tell me that you’re trying.”

Tommy forced himself to maintain eye contact. He couldn’t avoid the truth in her words, so he wanted to avoid her eyes instead, but that wasn’t fair. Though the shame was unbearable, roiling up in his chest and threatening to crumble him, he owed her his gaze and so much more.

A tear broke through, rolling down her cheek, and she quickly sniffed, rubbing it away with the heel of one palm. Tommy clasped his hands together to keep from reaching for her again. He’d witnessed her cry before during the three years they’d been together, and it never failed to gut him. He desperately wanted to replicate the way he’d held her back then—he could practically feel her in his arms—but he knew that he couldn’t comfort her when he was the reason she was crying.

“You were completely crazy,” she said, hugging her arms to her chest as much as the bundle of clothes she was carrying would allow. “I thought I’d seen you crazy before, but not like that.” The urgency in her speech faded, and she spoke softer, as if she were confessing a sin. “I’d never been afraid of you before. Not until that night.”

The truth, along with the memories, tore through him like a bullet. He’d been able to control it—the demons that plagued him, the voices that surfaced in his mind—off and on throughout his life, but there were times when he was powerless against them. His last night with Laney in this home had been one of those times. When his spiral of depression clouded everything else, it was hard to keep the voices at bay, to tell himself that the things he was seeing weren’t real. Of course, the drinking didn’t help.

He remembered her face, wild eyes and tear-stained cheeks, as she fought with him, screaming his name to break through the cacophony of voices inside of him. She’d been right there with him, struggling to make him see reason, but he’d been too far gone, lost inside himself.

“You were raving, Tommy.”

Her words were biting again, as harsh as the anger she wore like a shroud. But he’d take her anger over the broken way she’d looked as she watched the paramedics strap him to the gurney and load him into the back of the ambulance.

“You were staring at things that weren’t there, talking to nobody, talking to your *brother*.” With the last word she stared at him, lifting her brows in exasperation.

He knew he couldn’t make amends, not completely, unless he told her everything, and if he wanted to spend his life with her, then he would have to be honest with her, no matter how much he wanted to hide the truth. He took a breath, burying his hands in his pockets to hide their

shaking. “I’m—I’m sick. I have a psych sheet a mile long, and about a dozen different acronyms for all the things that are wrong with me.”

He’d expected her to either dismiss him outright as a liar or to run for the hills when he told her the truth. Instead, the ice in her gaze thawed slightly, and she relaxed her arms around her, her shoulders losing their tension.

He scuffed the tip of one shoe on the peeling wooden slats of the porch, ignoring the voice in his head telling him that he would never deserve her. “Apparently, I’m . . . I have schizophrenia.” He was still trying to process this revelation himself and saying it aloud to another person somehow made it more real, more tangible. “Which, I guess proves that I am crazy”—he swallowed—“but at least I know none of it’s real now.”

He lifted his gaze to hers, and he found her searching his face, her brows furrowed as if she couldn’t decide whether or not she wanted to believe him. He took a cautious step toward her, hoping that she wouldn’t move away again. He’d take it all back if he could, every minute of that night—the shouting at his own personal demons, the two bottles of Evan Williams he’d used to try and quiet them, the scuffle with police as they tried to restrain him—not to relieve himself of the pain of its memory, but to relieve her of it.

“I didn’t mean to fight with them, but I didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t. I could see these . . . these things everywhere.” He blinked away the memories—black eyes, crooked backs, gnarled fingers. “When the cops came, I couldn’t sort it out in my head, like who was who, and I just . . . I couldn’t make it stop. I was honestly just trying to keep it all away from me. I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone.” His gaze fell again, dropping to his feet before he could meet her eyes again. “Not anyone but me.”

It was her turn to look away. She chewed her bottom lip as she shifted her focus to the field beside their house, the hay rippling in the wind like an ocean of gold.

“I know I’m screwed up, Laney,” he said. “I know that, but there’s nothing I can do about it but to keep taking my meds. I haven’t had any”—it felt surreal to even say the words, like he was just checking off the symptoms of his illness—“hallucinations since that night, and I’m not drinking anymore.” He pleaded with her to understand, both in his rambling and his expression. “I understand if you hate me. You have every right to. But—” Tommy gave a sharp exhale, the pressure of unshed tears stinging behind his clamped eyelids. “But I’m sorry. I love you, and I’m so sorry. I swear I’ll do anything to prove to you that I’m trying to be better. That I will be better.”

She still faced away from him, but, in her profile, the light glinted off the tears on her cheeks, lighting them orange in the colors of the sunset. After a moment, she sighed and turned back to face him. There were still traces of weariness in her expression, still a slight tension in her face, but the fury from before was gone. “I don’t hate you,” she said. Her hand twitched just enough for him to think that maybe she wanted to reach out to him too, that she wanted to touch him just as badly as he wanted her to. “I could never hate you, Tommy. But I can’t go through all that again. I’m—”

“You won’t,” he said, rushing to reassure her. “I have mandatory AA classes and weekly visits with my doctor. I’m taking my medication. It’s all treatable. It’s not super common, but people *do* live with it every day. I *can* be okay.” As he said the words, he found himself actually believing them. For the first time in his life, he knew he could get through this. Now that there was a name for the things he saw and a rational explanation, he *could* work through it. If she was beside him.

She looked down, shifting the clothes in her arms once again. He saw an opening, a hairline crack in the dam of her distrust toward him, and he couldn't stop the desperate scramble to convince her.

"I can live with this, *we* can live with this, and I swear I'll never let it get to that point again, Laney. I already talked to Mac, and I can get my old job back. Everything will—"

"I'm pregnant."

All the air was sucked from his lungs, and the world tilted completely on its axis, leaving him dangling in mid-air and grappling for something to cling to. "What?"

Laney looked up at him and dropped her armload of belongings from in front of her waist. The motion tugged his t-shirt tighter across her abdomen, revealing the tiniest little baby bump; he may have never even noticed it thanks to his oversized t-shirt. "I'm pregnant," she said again, her brows now drawn in hesitancy.

A thousand questions ran through his mind. Unfortunately, he landed on the wrong one first. "Is it mine?"

The slightest bit of compassion he'd managed to garner over the course of their conversation vanished in an instant, leaving nothing but anger in its wake. She clenched her jaw again and narrowed her eyes at him. "Is it yours?" The words rolled off her tongue like dripping tar.

He took another step toward her, this time reaching for her hand. "Laney, I'm—"

"Is it yours?" An angry flush rose up her neck. She stood silent for a moment, long enough for him to open his mouth to try and apologize again, but he didn't get the chance. The jeans she'd been holding in her arms unfolded as she swung them at his face. "How dare you!"

What do you think I've been doing for the last three months? Bar hopping?" She turned away with a growl and stomped off the porch toward her car, cursing under her breath the entire way.

"Laney, stop," he said, taking the three steps from the porch in a single bound behind her. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. You haven't answered my letters, my calls, nothing. What was I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to think that I wouldn't just jump into the sack with someone else." She yanked her car door open, throwing her uniform into the front seat before rounding on him and pushing him away from her with both hands against his chest. "You're supposed to *know* me, Tommy! I'm sure your mother has had just lovely things to say about me since you've been home, filling your head full of all the ways I've been out whoring around while you were gone."

His mother had been saying such things—not that Tommy would ever believe her—but he decided agreeing with Laney wouldn't be the right answer just now.

"You know she cussed me out after the ambulance left with you."

Though the tears falling down her face now were due to anger, that didn't stop them from cutting through him. Once again, he was the cause.

"As soon as they drove off with you, before I could even talk to the police, she had a lot of very wonderful things to say about me, to the point that they had to tell her to leave. Apparently, her sweet, little Thomas putting a gun in his mouth wasn't a good enough reason for me to call the police."

That brought him up short, even as she continued to push him away from her. He and his mother had never spoken about that night, so, of course, he hadn't known, but it didn't surprise him. "I'm sorry, Laney," he said, as soon as she quieted. "I—I was just surprised. I do know you.

I thought . . . I don't know, I thought maybe that was your way of telling me to leave you the hell alone. Or that you'd found someone else."

"Of course, it's yours," Laney said with a sigh. "I found out two weeks after you were locked up, and I—" She looked up, breathing in deeply and biting her bottom lip before meeting his gaze again. "I almost got rid of it. Almost. But I . . . I couldn't. I couldn't do that. I want this baby, and I want to—" She closed her eyes briefly, but the quiver in her voice remained. "I don't know that I can trust you again, that I *should* trust you again, but I don't want to do this alone, Tommy."

Her shoulders drooped, as if the secret itself had weighed a ton, and she released a shaky breath as she dropped her face into her hands. He gave her the chance to leave then, to walk away from him if that's what she wanted, but she didn't. Tentatively, he reached out, brushing his fingers across her arms and down to her elbows. When she didn't flinch away from him, he closed the short distance between them and put his arms around her, tugging her into his chest.

His heart was racing at the prospect of being a father, but he could analyze and over-analyze later every reason for why he would be the worst father in the world; right now, she needed him, and the last thing he wanted to do was fail her again.

As she laid her head against his shoulder, Tommy breathed for the first time in months. Despite this revelation and the trepidation that came along with it, with her in his arms, he felt whole again, like reattaching a phantom limb; it was almost as if the last three months hadn't even happened. The sunset was behind him, the summer sun fading but still warming his back as the wind blew her flyaway locks into his face, and he breathed her in. As the smell of lavender washed over him, Laney dropped her hands from her face and edged them around his back, looping them beneath his arms, her palms flat against his shoulder blades.

She twisted her fists into his shirt, turning her face toward his, and the warmth of her tears seeped into his shirt as he brushed his nose against her temple. Her words barely discernible over the soft wind and the pounding in his chest, she said, "It's a boy."

Chapter Three

The first night back in his old home passed without incident, much to Tommy's surprise. He amazed himself when he stepped into the hallway without even a moment's hesitation at the darkness, a feat he'd never dreamed of as a child when the heavy pitch had loomed with shadows and whispers just outside of his view. But after Laney's revelation, he couldn't allow himself to hesitate. Whether he was ready now or not was irrelevant, he was going to be a father. And manning up without allowing himself a split second of fear was the first step in getting his life back together. He crept across the carpet, keeping his footfalls light to keep from waking his mother as he passed her bedroom door. In his newfound strength, a part of him wanted to wake her up then simply so he could share the news, but despite the slightest twinge of hope that a baby would make his mother accept Laney, he couldn't bring himself to knock on her door.

Instead, he showered and brushed his teeth in the hazy yellow of the bathroom light before walking into his childhood bedroom for the second time that day. He realized then, as he towel-dried his hair and opened a few of the boxes stacked by the closet door, that he needed to stop thinking about this as his *childhood* bedroom or his *childhood* home. This was just his bedroom, just *home*; it was all he had, for now at least. Laney had made that much clear, not that he could blame her.

I just need some time, Tommy, she'd said, and Tommy had to resist the urge to push, to remind her that she'd just had months of time, months that he'd missed while sitting in Creekside

talking about his feelings with Dr. Parsons, months that she'd been alone dealing with the stress of approaching motherhood without him. But, as he climbed beneath the same flannel sheets he'd used as a child and was engulfed in the smell of his mother's detergent and not Laney's shampoo, he thought time was the very least he could give her.

He expected nightmares or at least trouble sleeping, but sleep had come almost as soon as he pulled his old Mickey Mouse nightlight from the outlet in the wall beside his bed. Mickey's ears faded to darkness, plunging the room into a sheet of black so thick Tommy couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. He could've tucked his head beneath his comforter as he'd done as a child, but instead, Tommy fought the tug of unease that crept into the pit of his stomach, and said to himself, "There's nothing here but darkness." The sound of his own voice in the dark grounded him, squashing out the stitch of fear that threatened to rise up his throat, and sleep washed over him.

Tommy woke the next morning to the sound of rattling pans and sunlight shining in through his curtains. He rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, breathing in the salty smell of bacon frying. It reminded him of *home*, but not in a nostalgic sort of way. Instead, the familiar sound of his mother rustling around in the kitchen brought with it the realization that he'd missed the night before. This bed was too small, the blankets too scratchy on his skin, and even the sunlight was different, blaring directly onto his face rather than hidden behind the thick curtains Laney used to decorate their bedroom. An overwhelming weariness sank into his bones, pushing him further into the mattress. He wanted nothing more than to throw the blankets over his face and just ignore everything. No job yet—he'd have to wait on Mac to get back to him about a start date—and his mom was likely going into the factory this morning. There was no

reason why he couldn't just lay here in sulk, but two voices spoke up loud and clear in his mind, the first being Laney's.

"I just need some time." Needing more time wasn't the same thing as a *no*, but he had to push forward, even if that were her answer. He was going to be a father regardless of whether Laney would ever forgive him, and showing her that he was a better man than he'd been four months ago didn't start with sulking in bed all day long.

Her voice was immediately followed by that of Dr. Parsons. *"Life never stops for us, Thomas. Sometimes you want things to slow down, but no matter how difficult your circumstances, you still have to buy groceries or put gas in your car. You still have to keep doing all the things that life requires."*

A cabinet door slammed in the kitchen. His mother's way of telling him to get up. He heaved a loud sigh, puffing out his cheeks on the exhale, and forced himself up and out of bed. He found his mother just where he knew he would, sitting at the kitchen table, the watchful eyes of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane looking down on her from the painting on the wall. An ashtray full of cigarette butts sat in front of her, a haze of smoke circling around her head and a cup of coffee pressed to her lips. Her gaze was focused out the window across from her, but she turned toward him as he filled an empty glass from the faucet and tossed his medication into his mouth. The pill was far more bitter than its tiny pink form would have one believe, and Tommy grimaced. His mother's lips twitched briefly, and he expected her to comment on his *doping*, as she referred to any use of medication at all, but she only said, "Breakfast is on the stove if you're hungry."

Eddie Buckley bristled easily and could hold onto a grudge like the last life vest on a sinking ship. Even after Tommy assured her the day before that he'd never abandon her, she'd

still turned away from him, hiding her tears. She was an enigma, using her emotions to manipulate while resenting the weakness. It would take her a few days to get over the fact that he'd walked away, even if only for a few hours. In her mind, he'd chosen Laney over his own mother, and there'd be no rationalizing or explaining the insanity of that belief.

Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to poke the hornets' nest, but the stiffness in her words and the burn of cigarette smoke in his lungs so early in the morning had him bristling too. Tommy scooted the chair out beside her. The screech across the wood floors made her look up at him. Her lips were pursed as she gave a sniff and scraped the bent L-shape of her cigarette butt against the ashtray, stacking the soot-gray ash into a tiny mound off to one side.

He took a deep breath, keeping his voice steady and free of accusation. "Laney told me that you said some awful things to her after I was arrested."

Her shoulders lifted slightly as she shrugged, and her mouth dipped at the corners, defining the heavy frown lines around her lips. She gave a roll of her eyes and the smoke curled up in one last furl between them. This was the same woman who ladled out spoonfuls of soup at the homeless shelter in Nashville more times than he could count. The same woman who could sit on her knees, head bowed against the mourners' bench as she rasped out prayer after prayer for him, his brother, and any other lost soul in the world, and yet she was so cavalier about the woman he loved. "Well, I didn't say anything that wasn't—"

Tommy slammed his open palm down onto the table with enough force to rattle the amber ashtray and the coffee cup beside it. With a jolt, his mother looked up, her eyes wide. Under normal circumstances, he'd be ashamed of his outburst. Tommy wasn't the type of person who needed to strike fear in a woman to feel like a man—not like his father—and yet, in this instance, there was something gratifying about finally having her attention.

“I’ll sleep under a bridge before I stay here if I hear a single negative word about Laney again.” His words were as firm as his gaze, leaving no room for objection. “Do you understand me?” He’d argued with his mother before, over the years, but something in his voice—the cold fury he was barely able to suppress—must have made her believe him this time. Her lips formed into a tight line as she stared at him. Finally, she gave a tense nod, more a jerk of her head than anything.

“You can hate her if you want, but I’d be dead if she hadn’t called the police.”

She *harrumphed*. “Well, you wouldn’t have sat your ass in jail for a month if not for her either.” Her words were hard, but her hand shook as she opened her leather cigarette pouch, the metal clasp giving a soft *click* as it gave way.

Throughout his childhood, Tommy loved that in his mother’s eyes, he could essentially do no wrong. His poor grades were a fault of the teachers, their bad instruction to blame rather than his own lack of trying. When he’d broken the window at church with an errant baseball, she’d told him, “Well, the windows need to be replaced anyway.” Even back then, despite enjoying the cutback, he’d known her logic to be flawed. Now, enough was enough.

“Surely, you can’t blame that on *her*.” When his mother lifted her eyebrows pointedly in response as she lit up another cigarette, Tommy stared at her in disbelief. “Mom, I attacked a police officer. Tackled him *through* a sliding glass door. It’s a wonder either of us survived.” He lifted the sleeves of his shirt to show her the deep purple scars traversing across his arms and felt vindicated when the anger in her eyes gave way to empathy. “I did that,” he continued, “*Me*. Not her.”

Again, his mother said nothing. She exhaled smoke through her nose like some sort of dragon and pursed her lips.

Tommy ran a hand through his hair and sighed, knowing he was fighting a losing battle.

“I was going to do it. I would’ve pulled the trigger.”

Her sharp intake of breath as she closed her eyes was the only indication that she was even listening to him.

“I was, *am*, so tired of fighting it, Mom. I saw Samuel, I saw...*it*. Just like I always do. It’s like it was following me, coming out of me somehow, and—”

“*Shhh*,” his mother hissed. Her eyes cut around the kitchen, as if she expected a demon to crawl out of the shadows. Tommy supposed he couldn’t blame her for thinking that.

“It isn’t real, Mom. None of it is.”

She shook her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. They had this discussion a dozen times since he went to Creekside, and still he couldn’t make her see.

“There are no demons, no curse, no nothing. Dr. Parsons says—”

“He’s a quack, just like the rest. Quacks and unbelievers, the lot of them.”

“Mom, that’s ridiculous, they—”

“The way of the wicked is as darkness. They know not at what they stumble,” she recited, falling back on the habit she’d had for as long as he could remember—quoting Scripture any time she needed to back up her own asinine misgivings about the world.

“I haven’t seen a single thing since I started taking this medication. That’s proof. None of it’s real, mom.”

“A faithless and twisted generation,” she said, tapping the ashes from her cigarette.

“For God’s sake, do you even hear yourself?”

Tommy didn’t realize he’d raised his voice until the sound of it reverberated off the walls around them and his mother gasped.

“Thomas,” she said, fixing him with an icy glare that instantly made him feel fourteen again, “you can talk a big game about sleeping under a bridge and all that mess, but you will not take God’s name in vain in this house. I’ll pack your things myself before I let you disrespect my Lord; is *that* clear?”

Thomas said nothing as he looked away from her toward the blinking clock on the front of the microwave. The residual ignominy of adolescence still raging through him from his mother’s scowl made him fall back on that old companion, petty defiance.

“Thomas Zachariah.”

He ground his teeth together with another sigh. He could threaten to leave all he wanted, but both of them knew he had nowhere else to go. If he wanted to convince Laney that she could trust him again, he had to get back on his feet, and to do that, he had to have a place to sleep. He took a deep breath and turned back toward his mother.

“Yes, ma’am.”

And just like that, the power shifted to her favor, just like it always did.

“Good.” She nodded once and picked her pen back up to continue her crossword puzzle, extinguishing yet another cigarette in the process.

They were quiet for a moment, his mother returning to the pretense of finishing her puzzle and Tommy going back over his conversation with Laney. With the silence squeezing him like vice, he blurted, “Laney’s pregnant.” He wasn’t planning on telling her, not yet at least, but he opened his mouth and the words poured out. Perhaps, he wanted to feel something normal for once. He wanted to be a normal son sharing this news with his mother. He wanted her to have a normal reaction, to hug him and smile, to be happy about becoming a grandmother. He wanted

her to know how terrified he was, wanted her to tell him everything would be okay, that he would make a great father.

But they weren't normal. There was nothing normal about them.

She blinked a few times before laying her pen back onto the table once again and lifting her face toward him. Instead of the exuberant smile he'd hoped for, her face was masked, betraying no emotion. Her lips were tight and drawn.

After a moment, she asked, "Is it yours?"

Tommy could feel his face growing hot, radiating from beneath his collar—a mix of anger and indignity. "Of course, it's mine," he snapped.

His mother shrugged again. "You've been gone awhile, are you sure?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm sure. She found out just after I got arrested."

His mother was silent for a moment. Just as he started to speak, she stood with a groan and a *pop* of her back. "Well, I've got to get to work."

That was the way of his mother; she decided when the conversation was over.

"Mom, what am I—"

"Going to do? Well"—she huffed, shaking her head—"I suppose you'll just have to marry her."

The small thread of esperance he'd felt at telling his mother about her grandchild shriveled and died in his chest. Why had he, even for a moment, thought they could have something normal? Tommy bit down onto his bottom lip, forcing himself to remain silent. He couldn't even begin to explain to her how ridiculous that was. Of course he wanted nothing more than to marry Laney, baby or no baby, but that was not an idea Laney would be ready to consider yet. Maybe ever.

The kitchen door closed behind her, and Tommy was alone for the first time in the house he couldn't seem to get away from.

Tommy's former boss leaned back in his chair. The desk he sat behind was littered with blueprints, receipts, and one dusty, yellow hardhat. John Macdonald, Mac to his friends and employees, was in his mid-50s and on the heavier side of stocky. He scratched his hand through his stubble and said, "I know I said you could have your old position back, Tom, but we just don't have the work right now."

Tommy frowned. "Come on, Mac. There's got to be something." He'd been working for the same contracting crew for fourteen years, and swinging a hammer was about the only experience he had. He was counting on this job, and without it . . . well, the Krystal's on the corner across the street was looking more and more like one of the only options he'd have.

Mac leaned forward and leveled his gaze at Tommy. "Look, I know you're in a bind, and you've been a great asset over the years. You're damn good at what you do, and I don't care about whatever kind of trouble you got yourself into, but I can't just cut somebody loose because you're back and need some money."

Pushing his hands up on his knees, stood up. "I understand. I know I put you guys in a real bind, and . . ." Mac had taken Tommy under his wing when he was only seventeen and taught him everything about construction—framing, finishing, drywall—and it was all Tommy knew. But he'd have to find something else. He'd soon have a kid to take care of, and it wouldn't matter whether—

Mac's own sigh stopped Tommy's spiraling thoughts. "If you can give me a couple weeks, I'll move some stuff around and find you a spot, alright? Once we get out of the hottest part of summer, you know as well as I do work's goin' to pick up again."

Tommy sagged, relief radiating through him. "Thank you so much, Mac. Really, I appreciate it. I won't—"

Mac waved him off with a hand the size of a baseball mitt but smiled, nonetheless. "Yeah, yeah, just don't screw it up, kid."

When Tommy started his truck, the gas light *dinged* at him, illuminated bright red between the speedometer and RPM gauge. Between court costs and lawyer fees, Tommy had never been more grateful than he was right now that Laney had convinced him to save their extra money rather than buying a new truck last summer like he'd wanted to. Otherwise, that "couple weeks" Mac mentioned would really have him scraping the bottom of the barrel. As it stood, Tommy still had enough leftover in his savings to hold him, but even thinking that left a sour taste in his mouth. Laney had been keeping up the house payment all on her own the last few months, and he was willing to bet she worked more than her fair share of overtime to make up for his half of their bills.

Tommy stopped at the Texaco a few miles from home and ignored the leering eyes of the two old men sitting at the bench out front as he pumped his gas. This had been his first job, almost twenty years ago, and though he had to lie about his age to Mr. Ritter, Tommy was sure the old man didn't believe for a minute that he'd been sixteen at the time. He'd spent two years using the place as a haven from the hell going on at home and in return kept the dusty, old storefront as clean as could be expected for a business that had been around since just after the Stone Age.

Tommy dropped the gas pump back into the slot and nodded toward the two men on the bench who were still whispering like two old biddies. “Mr. Harrigan, Mr. Taylor.” Neither responded to him exactly, though the latter did give a harrumph just as Tommy stepped inside the store. He’d expected no less. Mr. Taylor’s oldest son was Tommy’s age; they’d been in school together until Tommy dropped out junior year, and little Nathan Taylor was now the not-so-little Lieutenant Taylor. It didn’t matter that Tommy and the sheriff’s deputy he’d inadvertently tackled through a sheet of glass had made amends or that Tommy himself had gotten the worst of the injuries, the “boys in blue” stuck together. To take a shot at one meant making an enemy of them all . . . and apparently their fathers as well.

Tommy paid for his gas, thanking his good fortune that the clerk behind the register was a young twenty-something with half her head shaved and a nose ring and not Mr. Ritter. Tommy didn’t think he could take another pitying look of disappointment today. He did a final loop through town, the same loop he’d driven most nights when he was a teenager, but it was mid-afternoon on a Friday. The few friends he’d had at sixteen certainly weren’t still driving through town in their thirties regardless of the time of day. He fought the urge to drive toward Laney’s house, respecting her wishes for space despite every fiber in his being urging him to keep going past Roundtree Lane and make a quick pass through. He gripped the steering wheel tighter as he turned onto his road, ignoring the thoughts of another truck in *his* driveway. She’d told him the baby was his, and he trusted her. So why did he have to keep reminding himself of that?

His home taunted him at the end of the lane, looming slightly above the road on a hill and overlooking the land around it like some Hitchcockian monster, and Tommy realized what he’d been doing all morning: anything he could do to stay out of the house while his mother wasn’t home. Pathetic.

Objectively, there was nothing inherently creepy about his home. It was in need of repairs, yes, but the walls didn't seem to grow when you looked at them from a different angle and a heavy darkness didn't emanate from its walls . . . not on the outside at least. Here, sitting in his own driveway with the light of a summer sun shining warmly on the overgrown grass, it looked like any other home.

Tommy slammed his truck door a little too roughly and flinched at the sound breaking through the summer air. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up when the ringing cleared from his ears, and he was left in complete silence. No chirping of birds or whirr of cars even in the distance, at once, the house darkened. He turned back toward the road, feeling a strange pull in his ears, and now the road sat a half a mile away, as if the driveway itself had stretched like a worm wiggling beneath his fingers.

He took a step back and the heel of his boot caught on a loose stone in the gravel driveway. He clung to the hood of his truck for support, his fingers gripping beneath the warm metal at the base of his windshield. "This isn't real," Tommy said, closing his eyes so tightly that colors lurched behind his eyelids. He stood there, repeating the words to himself on a loop, until the sound of birds overtook the heady thud of his own blood in his ears. The air hung with the scent of honeysuckle and roses as his breathing deepened.

Tommy opened his eyes, and the house once again looked just like a house and the driveway stopped less than fifty feet away at the one-lane blacktop. He'd beaten it. Tommy swallowed as he opened the door and stepped inside, ignoring the weighty thumping of his heart that had yet to catch up with the rest of his senses. Despite the slight tremor in his hand as he flipped the light switch in the kitchen, pride rose in his chest. For the first time since his arrest, since the long stretch of time at Creekside and the start of his medication, he'd had his very first

“episode,” as Dr. Parsons called them, and he’d withstood it. That had never happened before. Not once had Tommy been able to stop the careening crash once it started until today, and though it had only been the first, he felt powerful, in charge of himself for once.

It’ll get easier, Dr. Parsons had said. *The more you fight it, the easier it’ll get*. He knew, through the seemingly never ending pamphlets and education sessions he’d sat through at Creekside, that he’d never be “cured,” but at least he’d been given the tools he needed to fight his own mind.

The kitchen opened directly into the living room and to his left stood the hallway, with his room all the way to the end on the right and Samuel’s at the end to the left. He’d spent his childhood walking past that room, refusing to even look in that direction on most occasions and on others, when his head was strangely quiet, he’d almost forgotten the room even existed. It was a scar, a remnant of an old wound that Tommy forgot about entirely unless he was staring directly at it. Then the painful reminder of the injury came back all over again. Right now, standing in front of his brother’s bedroom door, Tommy felt that reminder. Just on the other side of the door, he knew exactly what he’d find, and just like in the driveway when he’d forced his mind to see the truth about this house, he knew what he *wouldn’t* find as well. There’d be no monsters in the closet beside the bed, no scratches on the walls, and certainly no faces looming up at him from the dark abyss beneath the bed. Tommy reached forward, took the cold knob in his hand, and opened the door before he could talk himself out of it.

The screech of the unused hinge on the door creaked, cutting through the house’s thick silence. He stepped into the room, and his skin prickled. It was cold, far colder than the rest of the house, and a subtle, musty smell hung in the air, the smell of unwashed sheets and dusty drapes. The wood groaned beneath his feet as he stepped inside. He’d only been in here a couple

times after Samuel's death, but the room was etched into his mind like scorches across a wood burning regardless. Samuel's bedside table sat just the way he remembered it, as did the dresser, and Tommy knew before he slid the drawers open, Samuel's clothes would still be folded neatly inside them.

Samuel had inherited the orderly trait from somewhere in their genetic pool that must've skipped Tommy. He'd always kept his things in neat rows, unlike the scattered mess of trash and loose change that always gathered on every free surface in Tommy's room, much to Laney's chagrin over the last few years. Laney's side-eye and his months at Creekside had given Tommy something his mother's ranting never had as a child, a newfound understanding for neatness and routine. But Samuel had always had it.

Tommy slid the drawer closed and his gaze trailed across the top of his brother's dresser, looking over the neat row of cologne bottles, Samuel's watch—long since stopped ticking—and a stack of old magazines, mostly *Maxim* and *WWF*. The mirror was covered in a fine layer of dust, just like the dresser, and sticking out from between the glass and the frame were a dozen or so pictures. Scattered amongst the bikini-clad magazine cut-outs of the brunette from *Saved by the Bell* and Kelly Bundy were photographs of their family over the years.

Despite the way she'd kept his room like a shrine, when Samuel died, Edie removed most of the pictures of Samuel from the walls throughout the house, replacing them with paintings of Jesus on the cross or shepherds and their sheep, so the majority of the time that Tommy saw Samuel, it was in his memory. But now, edged haphazardly beneath the frame of Samuel's mirror, photo after photo of him stared up at Tommy, each with him immortalized in color with a carefree smile on his face. Half featured Tommy as well, sporting his own wide, toothy grin, but

in each of them, Tommy was staring up at his brother as if he were Superman. Wasn't that how Tommy had always seen Samuel, like a superhero?

Tommy swallowed the thick lump lodged in his throat as he wiped the dust from one photo in particular, one of himself as an infant in a clear plastic bassinet, wrapped in a customary hospital blue-and-pink-striped blanket with a freckle-faced Samuel gaping down at him in awe. That's how they'd always been, or at least the way it had felt to Tommy, as if they were always looking to one another for support.

The last photo was bent, shoved so forcefully beneath the frame that Tommy had to tug as hard as he could without fearing he'd actually rip it before it finally pulled free. Tommy couldn't have been more than four or five, sitting in his mother's lap in what looked like their church's fellowship hall. She wore a tense smile, with none of the deep lines on either side of it that now graced her features. Samuel sat beside her, his face the pimply and splotchy skin of a teenager. The folded bit, the half that had been shoved beneath the frame and hidden from view showed their father, and Tommy's skin tingled. It was the first time he'd seen his father's face since he was seven. If Samuel's photographs throughout the house had been limited, Dale Buckley's had been completely nonexistent. Tommy hadn't even really thought of him in years, and now, staring down at his image, Tommy remembered him as if he'd never left. He could smell the whisky in the air and almost hear the gravel in his voice as he shouted at one of them to "turn that damned television down." In the photo, his beard was neatly trimmed, just as gray as it was in Tommy's recollection, and his heavy eyebrows framed deep-set coal-like eyes. And in the photograph, both Dale Sr. and Samuel 'Dale' Jr. wore matching scowls.

Samuel had been more of a father figure to him than their father had ever been, and Samuel had been there to mend them back together again. Even if their father's abandonment

had left a burden like a millstone tied around Samuel's neck. Only a year later, Samuel too had left them.

Tommy's jaw ached as he released the clenching of his teeth. Without thinking, he ripped the photograph in half, right down the length of the deep fold in the glossy paper, separating his family from the man who'd abandoned them. He balled the paper into a fist, crinkling the sharp edges in his palm before shoving it into his back pocket and tucking the photo of himself, his brother, and his mother back into the edge of the mirror where it had been.

He turned on his heel to leave but a fold in the rug tripped him up. He straightened it with his foot, flattening out the bend in the roll in the fabric and took a seat onto Samuel's bed. Directly in front of him sat the decorative round table just beside the bedroom door where Samuel kept a small black fan that he never turned off. Samuel used to say he could never sleep without it on, but he kept it on all hours of the day too. It had been one of the constant sources of arguments between Samuel and their father, but Tommy's eyes weren't focused on the fan or the table itself but, instead, on the tea-green cloth draped on top of it. It was so long it touched the floor in soft ripples, but on one side, the cloth was stuck on a table leg, and Tommy could see just the corner of a small shelf. He squatted down beside it and lifted the linen, exposing a shelf that connected to the four table legs, making the perfect hiding spot for a stack of notebooks.

Some were spiral bound with the wire binding warped and flattened in spots, as if Samuel had shoved them in a tight backpack or squashed them beneath a few books. Others were composition books with the black-and-white covers that resembled television static.

All at once, Tommy knew he shouldn't be in here. The curtain was folded up, so his mother had to know this was here, and Tommy remembered the few occasions he'd come in here as a child.

One in particular sprang to mind, when his mother had snatched him by the collar of his shirt and

dragged him out the door, her other hand swatting him with each word of “Don’t you ever come in here again.” One of the only times she’d ever spanked him.

He reached forward tentatively, as if his fingers coming in contact with the stack of journals would make his mother materialize from out of nowhere to catch him. Tommy scowled. He wasn’t ten anymore. He was a grown man, albeit a grown man stuck once again in his mother’s house, but a grown man, nonetheless. He lifted the top three from the shelf and stretched his legs out in front of him, but just as he flipped the first one open, the utility room screen door slammed shut.

Tommy shoved them back into their hiding spot before even taking his next breath and leapt to his feet. He straightened the tablecloth as quickly as possible when the front door opened and his mother’s keys rattled as she put them back into her purse. He started toward the door, but quickly reached beneath the tablecloth and snatched the first notebook off the shelf before bolting for the door and easing it shut. He made it into his bedroom across the hall just as the sound of his mother’s purse being slid beneath the end table made its way to his ears, and Tommy exhaled. He shoved the composition book beneath his pillow and made it back to his door just as his mother’s face came into view in the doorway.

“Well, what’d you find out?” she asked, one hand on her hip and her brows raised expectantly.

Tommy blinked, his heart in his throat. “Wha—about what?”

His mother tilted her head to one side, her brow furrowing like he was an idiot. “From Mac? Didn’t you go see him about work today?”

His shoulders untensed. “Oh, yeah, umm, he said it’d be a couple weeks before he could get me back on the crew, but he definitely has a spot for me.”

Eddie smiled, making the corners of her eyes crinkle up by the graying hair at her temples, as if they hadn't shouted at one another this morning. That was always her way, fight and then pretend it never happened. "That's great." She sat on the edge of his bed, her hand resting on his pillow—the pillow where he'd hidden the journal—and he fought the urge to cut his eyes toward it. "Why don't we go to Keller's for dinner? I'm dead on my feet, and cooking's about the last thing on my mind."

"Sure, Ma. Whatever you want to do."

Eddie stretched, rolling her shoulders back, and the corner of the journal peeked out on one side.

"Actually," Tommy said, offering her his hand, "how about I cook for you tonight?"

A laugh bubbled out of her, and she looked skeptically, first at his hand and then at his face. "You? Cook? You trying to burn my house down?"

Tommy rolled his eyes as his mother slipped her hand into his. "I have been taking care of myself for years, you know. What? Did you think I survived on beanie weenies and Spam?" Lifting his other hand toward the door, he let his mother walk out first, casually slipping the journal back beneath his pillow as soon as his mother released his fingers.

"Of course not," Eddie replied before cutting her eyes back at him with one eyebrow raised. "Ramen noodles, though."

Chapter Four

Tommy blamed the blaring of the smoke alarm on his mother's gas oven.

"My stove doesn't cook nearly this hot," he shouted over the sound of the obnoxious beeping. He'd lifted the kitchen window as his mother fanned a throw pillow in front of the

blaring smoke detector. But it was worth it, regardless. Before his arrest, he hadn't spent much time at his old home—as little as he could get away with, in fact—and thus he didn't spend nearly as much time with his mother as he once did. Growing up will do that. But, on the occasions that he did see her, she very rarely smiled. Instead the fine lines between her eyebrows and on either side of her lips had deepened with time, and he couldn't recall the last time he'd heard her laugh. But laugh she did as his steaks sizzled and smoke billowed from the cast iron skillet.

“It's okay,” she told him as she clapped him on the back and he scowled down at the offending hunks of charred meat. “That just adds to the flavor.” Her gray eyes danced as she pinched her lips between her teeth to keep from laughing at him further. Thankfully, the baked potatoes were still edible, and after sawing off the scorched edges, the steaks weren't even the worst he'd ever tasted.

All in all, the headache he'd gotten from the smoke and smell of burning butter had all been worth it due to the broken tension between him and his mother and the smile on her face. Even with the meal very nearly ending in disaster, she'd thanked him multiple times. She slid her empty plate away from her and patted an arthritic hand across the back of his own on the table. “I don't believe anyone has ever cooked for me before.”

“Never?” Tommy wasn't sure why he was surprised. His father had certainly not been the type of man to cook for his wife, and the two had gotten together when Edie was only sixteen. Edie lit a cigarette and shook her head as she put it to her lips. After a deep inhale, she said, “Not since I was a little girl, anyway.” She looked out the window beside them as if she wanted to say more, but she only kept taking draws from her cigarette as Tommy thought back to anything his mother had ever told him about when she was “a little girl.” Nothing. Well, next to nothing.

Outside of admitting that she'd had a sister at one time and her own father died when they were both young, Edie never spoke about her childhood at all.

“Did your parents burn the steaks too?” Tommy asked with a smile, trying to draw his mother out of the cloud of melancholy that crept in at her mention of youth. But Edie shook her head as if to clear whatever thoughts were threatening to overtake her.

“I don't even remember.” She chuckled as she crushed her cigarette into the ashtray and stood, gathering the dishes from the table. “That was a long time ago.”

Tommy opened his mouth, but Edie quickly added, “I think I'll take care of these dishes and then get me a bath. I'm feeling a bit tuckered out.” And just like that, the conversation was over. Tommy stood as well and raked the last of the scraps into the bowl with the skins from their baked potatoes to dump in the garden. When he came back in, his mother was already gone.

Tommy shuffled around his bedroom, unpacking boxes to find the rest of his clothes. He considered unpacking them all, but the last thing he wanted was to settle in the same bedroom he'd lived in when he was a child. That felt too much like admitting defeat, too close to admitting that Laney was never going to take him back. So instead, he just stuck with his clothes, removing T-shirts and jeans from two of the boxes before packing the musty cardboard-smelling garments to the utility room to be washed. His eyes were drawn to the pillow on his bed, but he didn't even want to get Samuel's journal out while his mother was still awake, so he forced himself to keep working instead. He pulled books out, stacking a few of his favorites onto his nightstand beside the gaudy, glass-shaded touch lamp that had been sitting on it since somewhere around 1995. One lovely side effect to his medication was that it occasionally made it difficult to

sleep, so having *A River Runs Through It* and *Blood Meridian* nearby would keep him from staring up at his ceiling all night long if he had another sleepless night.

He worked his way through two loads of laundry, each time half expecting for his mother to come in and shoulder him out of the way so that she could do it for him, and then sat down on the sofa in the den. Turning on the flatscreen that sat on top of the giant, brick-like television, from circa-the year Tommy was born—the damned thing probably weighed as much as he did, so it's no wonder his mother chose to use it as furniture instead of moving it—and flipped through the channels before settling on reruns of black-and-white *Andy Griffith*, all the while waiting for his mother to go to sleep.

Finally, after three episodes of *Andy* having to pull Barney Fife some sort of shenanigan or another, his mother told him goodnight, and Tommy heard her bedroom door close with a click. Still, after going to his own room, he waited another thirty minutes after the light streaming through the crack in the door darkened before he even risked pulling the journal out from its hiding place beneath the pillow. He'd learned that lesson at fifteen after botching his attempts to sneak-out and meet Mary Jane Whittaker—his one and only girlfriend in high school—by rushing it and opening his window before his mother had actually fallen asleep.

He immediately recognized his brother's handwriting across the pages, but the first few were mostly just his name or silly notes that made Tommy chuckle to himself—*don't forget history test on friday* and *randy savage rules! rick flair sucks!* The pages were littered with sketches that looked as if Samuel had drawn them in the middle of class, those weird S doodles that Tommy remembered every kid doing in elementary school and one ridiculous caricature of Mr. Johnson, accentuating the junior high principal's already-too-large ears and signature

emerald-green blazer. A wave of nostalgia washed over him as he thumbed through the pages, and Tommy sniffed, fighting back the tears prickling in the corners of his eyes.

So often throughout his life, Tommy had been forced to repress thoughts of his brother, not only because his mother refused to even acknowledge his existence most days but because it hurt. Samuel had been the closest thing to a father that Tommy had, and he just abandoned him. Just as his actual father had. The twist of guilt knotted in his stomach, as it always did when he thought of his brother. The quell of anger and resentment always resulted in shame and guilt, both at having not been able to save him and for not being enough for Samuel to want to save himself. He either idolized him or hated him for leaving, and no amount of counseling with Dr. Parsons had made it possible for him to just turn those feelings off.

But now, flipping through page after page of Samuel's scrawling handwriting, the tears he held back weren't those of hurt and anger. He hadn't known his brother at this age; at eleven years older than him, Samuel had always seemed more like an adult to him. The Samuel Tommy remembered had once been the toughest man he'd known, untouchable, invincible even, protecting Tommy from their father's shouts and drunken diatribes, and later, the monsters loose in their home. His brother had always been six-feet-tall and bulletproof, but, of course, that wasn't true. At one time, he'd been ten just like Tommy had been, sketching goofy doodles in the middle of Math class and writing himself reminders about homework. The slightest edge of resentment and betrayal that Tommy carried around his neck like a noose began to break away as he saw his brother not as a grown man unfairly responsible for the welfare of a seven-year-old boy but as a child himself, a child who watched Saturday morning cartoons and WWF on Monday nights, who took History tests and wrote barely-legible papers for school.

Tommy held the open edge of the book in his hand and shifted his thumb back enough to flip the pages quicker. Half the book was empty pages, but when he barely caught a glimpse of a nearly full-length page of Samuel's spidery scrawl, he flipped the pages backward. It was the first of what Tommy had originally expected upon finding the journals, an actual entry more so than the doodling of a child.

That bastard did it again! I hate him. It was reely my fault. I was sposed to help him load the tabacco onto the truck after school, but a few of the other guys were playing football behind Benny Bills. They never ask me to play but this time they did. I knew he would be mad but I staid any way and when I got home, he was screeming like he always does. I should of just kept my stupid mouth shut but I hate it when he calls me names lik that. Mom told him to stop and then he screemed at her instead. She slapped his hand off my shirt neck so he hit her. Then he just walked away and didnt even help her up. I wish he would of just switched me. I wish he would die.

Tommy closed the book, squeezing the edges until the old cardboard on the back started to tear. Tommy vaguely even remembered his father, but the parts he did remember weren't any he'd like to. The man's voice had boomed through the house, and they all walked on eggshells to avoid it, tiptoeing through life to escape his wrath. The air had always been static, full of tension and anger long before Tommy recalled ever seeing anything scary in the shadows himself. Before the monsters had been of his own creation, his own father had been the monster they all lived with.

He'd smelled strongly of tobacco leaves, cinnamon whiskey, and sweat, and Edie had shrunk in front of him, curling in on herself even while always putting herself between her boys

and their father. The man had never touched him, never in anger or affection; more than anything, Dale had generally acted as if none of them were there. He rarely spoke to them at all, and when he did, his words were either barking orders or, when he was drunk, telling them all how worthless they were. Tommy preferred the former, and he remembered hiding out in Samuel's room or his own any time his father was home, trying to remain invisible because the last thing he wanted was to be seen by him, and most of the time, that worked.

Once, when Tommy was five or six, his father came home, and Tommy could immediately tell from the sound of stomping boots across the kitchen floor that it wasn't a night where they'd be invisible.

"Stay in here, Tommy." Samuel's hand had been sweaty as he shoved him into his own bedroom. Samuel's eyes were wide as he whispered the words again before turning on the radio and disappearing out the door. Tommy flinched at the sound of slamming cabinets and breaking china, but he'd never left the room. Words like "sissy" and "stupid bitch" cut through the blaring of Dwight Yoakam on the stereo. Still to this day, Tommy couldn't listen to *A Thousand Miles from Nowhere* without his heart racing. He'd buried his head under the pillow, and listed off all the books of the Bible in his mind to keep from hearing the sound of fists on flesh. Later, when Samuel came to get him, his brother's lip was split and cracked with blood on one side. Edie's eyes were red-rimmed, and her hands shook as she swept broken dishes from the floor. At the time, Dale was nowhere to be seen, but when Tommy saw him the next day, he remembered feeling an ounce of pride at his brother's strength when he saw his father's black eye and bruised cheekbone. After that, Dale spoke to them less and less, but none of them minded. They preferred it that way.

Tommy frowned and straightened the book back out. He sat up, stretching his legs out in front of him on his bed and flattening the pages on top of his quilt between his knees. He frowned and flipped the pages open again, stopping now upon not another entry but a sketch. He had to turn the book on its side to see the drawing of a dachshund etched across both pages, its stubby front legs taking up the left side while its back legs and spiked tail ended at the paper's edge on the right side. *SPARKY* was scrawled across the top in thick bubble letters, and despite the weight of the last entry, Tommy felt himself smile, nonetheless. He'd completely forgotten about Sparky. The short liver-colored "wiener dog," as Tommy had always called it, had followed Samuel around like . . . well, like a lost puppy.

"He's not a wiener dog, Tommy, he's a *dachshund*," Samuel said on more than one occasion, but he was then—and would forever, in Tommy's mind, be—a wiener dog. Tommy could have only been four or five when Samuel had saved every dollar he earned from mowing yards and mending fences for Old Man Baker down the street to afford to buy the flea-bitten thing from some friend of his at school, and for as long as Tommy could remember, Sparky had slept at the foot of Samuel's bed.

Tommy traced his fingers along the letters practically carved into the paper in blue ink, feeling the ridges rise and fall along the page. In the year that followed Samuel's death, Sparky had changed. The jovial creature that had loped so freely on his brother's bootheels would seldom leave Samuel's room, and on more than one occasion, Tommy remembered him howling all hours of the night from the foot of Samuel's bed, a long mournful bawl that clattered inside Tommy's head like dishes on the kitchen floor, until Edie had finally snapped. She'd shouted over and over at the dog while Tommy covered his ears and begged for it all to stop, begged for his brother to come back, begged for things to be normal, until she grabbed Sparky by the scruff

of his neck and lifted him from the bed. He'd been the friendliest dog before Samuel's death, always ready to cover your face in drool and slobber and chase after a tennis ball, but then, with Edie carrying him by the back of his neck, the dog snapped and snarled like he was possessed. And when he grabbed ahold of Edie's wrist, she'd yelped and let him drop to the floor. Sparky charged at the screen door and sprang up onto it, pushing it open by his front paws and disappearing into the night. They'd never seen him again, and after dealing with the death of his brother and then taking care of his mother, Tommy had never even looked for him.

Tommy flipped through a few more blank pages before landing on another entry. He had to flip the book over, as Samuel had written this one upside down and on the opposite page for some reason.

I have a brother! His name is Thomas, but I already know Im going to call him Tommy. he doesnt look like a Thomas too me. He was born a little bit early so he has to stay at the hospital until hes strong enough to come home. Mom had to stay there with him for a few days so I was stuck at home with dad. Ive never been by myself with him before but ive just staid in my room away from him. Theres a weird smell in here, like a dead rat or something but I cant' find it even though I dug thru my whole closet. I'll just wait for mom to come home.

There was a sketch accompanying this one that Tommy could only assume was meant to be a baby version of himself. The infant in the drawing had hair sticking up all over his oddly-shaped head and its arms wrapped like a burrito. The next words he read sank into Tommy's stomach like lead, and a dull ache took up residence in his chest.

Im going to take care of you Tommy. I'm going to teach you how to play baseball and do a powerbomb. Me and mom, we'll keep you safe. As soon as I can I will get us both out of here. And you wont ever wonder if anyone loves you.

The tears that had threatened to overtake him at the pictures he found earlier in Samuel's room finally broke free. Not for himself or even for the Samuel he knew, but for this little boy, the eleven-year-old child who had known hurt so deep that he could tell his baby brother that he'd never let him feel the same pain. Tommy dropped the journal onto the bed between his knees and leaned his head backward against the headboard behind him. His vision blurred as he looked up at the ceiling. What could his brother have gone through that made him feel so lonely and lost? He swallowed and released a shaky breath around the lump in his throat.

Tommy opened the drawer on his nightstand and dropped the journal inside, gritting his teeth as he slid the drawer closed as quietly as possible. That was enough Memory Lane for one night. Lying back on his bed, he closed his eyes and focused his thoughts on controlling his breathing the same way Dr. Parsons had taught him. In for a count of four, hold for four, and out for eight. Four-four-eight. Four-four-eight. He continued until his pulse slowed and the tension in his chest subsided.

"You can't live in the past, Thomas." Dr. Parsons's words echoed in his mind. He was right, of course. Tommy would soon be a father, and no matter how horrible his own had been, that wasn't any indication of what kind of father he would be. Tommy's gaze gravitated toward the drawer beside his bed, but with a deep sigh, Tommy reached over and tapped his finger against the cold metal of his lamp's base and extinguished his room into darkness. He couldn't

live with the ghosts of the past and push forward at the same time. And he had no choice but to push forward.

Chapter Five

Days passed, and Tommy grew accustomed to resisting urges—as much as one could get used to such a thing. He fought against his desire to call Laney, to beg her to let him come home every day when he knew she was getting ready for work and every night when he lay in bed by himself. A bed that smelled of his childhood and not of her coconut shampoo. He'd already taken so much from her and given so little in return, and now what she'd asked for was space—more space, more time—and even if the thought of her being with someone else made it hard to breathe, he'd give her that.

He resisted the compulsion to sneak back into Samuel's room and steal another one of his journals. Well, it wasn't exactly stealing since he fully intended on putting it back, but something about sneaking around made him feel dirty, like he was doing something wrong, especially given how he knew his mother would react.

You're thirty. Stop being a sissy.

Then, with nowhere to really go and nothing to really do, his thoughts would always return to his father and the memories associated with the journal entries he'd read. His father never called Tommy by his name. To him, both Samuel and Tommy had been *sissies* or *pansy boys*, and even without realizing it, Tommy had carried those fears over into adulthood—fear of appearing weak or fragile. It was a fear that Dr. Parsons helped soften the edges of when Tommy refused to even speak for the first few weeks of their sessions together.

“There’s nothing weak about sadness, Thomas. It’s a scary thing to be vulnerable with another person, but it’s necessary for recovery. Children, boys in particular, are often convinced by their parents or even the world at large to hold all of that in because ‘real men don’t cry,’ right?” Even with the way the doctor had turned his mouth into an exaggerated frown and said the words in a mocking deep-bass voice, the phrase itself had made him clench his fists. His father said that exact thing to them, particularly to Samuel once his own mental illness began rearing its ugly head in their house.

Being back in the home where it all started, where all the baggage that plagued him was initially piled onto his shoulders, made his thoughts devolve into this cyclical spiral. Laney—Samuel—*sissy*—Dale—*I’ve got to get the hell out of here*—back to Laney again. It went on and on throughout the days, and he knew it was something he’d have to talk to Dr. Parsons about when they had their first visit post-release. So far, he’d managed to keep his impulsive deliberations tamped down, but being stuck here was definitely beginning to mess with his mind.

Last night, when he was still awake at 2:27 a.m., when reading Norman Maclean’s dry humor still hadn’t put him to sleep, he’d lain in bed staring up to make constellations in the ridges of popcorn dangling from the ceiling, when a faint scratching sound came from his closet. At first it was barely audible, and he thought maybe he was imagining it, but then, after a few moments, the scratches grew bolder. Rather than sounding like the tiny scratchings of a mouse, they were longer, more drawn out and pronounced, fingernails scraping against the wood pallets in his closet floor. Despite the pounding in his heart and the sweat on his palms, Tommy pushed through the echo of his father’s deriding voice and got up, flinging the door open forcefully enough that the worn, old jackets and his mother’s dresses blew in the breeze of its wake. But there was nothing there. Not even boxes or shoes for him to dig through to try to find the source

of the sound. Being here, in this house that held the foundation of all his worst fears, had made him afraid to even look for the rat that must be living in the walls behind his closet. It was ridiculous. What was the stupid phrase that Dr. Parsons mentioned? Occam's Razor? His mind hadn't gone to horses as it should have—or, in this case, mice—but instead, he'd fallen into the trap of zebras, thinking that the thing that lived solely in his mind had returned and taken up residence in his closet. It wasn't a rational thought for a man over thirty to be having.

So, rather than sit inside and mope about his future or lack of current prospects to get the hell out of this house, Tommy forced himself to be proactive. Until Mac called him with a job, he'd have to just keep himself busy, and he did that by working around his mother's house. It was solely because it needed to be done—there was more work outside than in—and not at all because he was still rattled a bit despite his ongoing self-talk and needed to be outside of the house as much as possible.

He'd already weeded her flowerbeds, tugging root after root out of the soft dirt and tossing them across the fence and as far away from his mother's irises as he could get them, and trimmed the grass from around the house. He'd managed to avoid not one but two rat snakes with the weed-eater line in the waist-high grass beside the front porch, shooing them out of the yard rather than killing them, though he knew his mother would rather they be dead. But with the grass being much neater, he was confident that they wouldn't be back.

Painting wasn't the priority until after he returned to work, though. He had some money left, thankfully but not enough that he could be splurging on paint when he could help it. So the peeling, mahogany-colored shutters would have to wait. Everything in due course.

He was underneath his mother's car, twisting the drain plug on her oil pan when the sound of gravel crunching drew his attention. Tommy craned his neck behind him, but even with

the station wagon up on ten-inch ramps, he could only make out tires and the bumper of the car parked behind his mother's. He inched his way from underneath the car on the broken down box he'd put beneath him, and stood up just as Laney stepped out of her Altima. His heart jumped into his throat.

"Hey." She closed her door and took a step toward him. She was dressed in her work clothes, black pants and a black button-down, her hair tied back and a black headband holding the stray curls out of her face. Tommy flipped his ball cap back around, facing the bill forward after he'd had it backwards to fit beneath the car, and wiped his oily hands onto the legs of his work jeans, adding to the slew of dark stains that already covered them. "I see you still don't use a rag for that." Her lips curled up on one side in just the barest hint of a smile as she looked up at him.

He shrugged, trying to appear as if he wasn't terrified of whatever it was she'd come to tell him.

She doesn't want you. She never wanted you. She wants you to stay the hell away from her and her baby.

Tommy swallowed. "They're already—"

"Ruined, I know." She gave him a small grin and rested against the hood of her car. "I've heard that story a time or two. Just make sure you don't put 'em straight into the washer. I'd hate for your mother's to be ruined too."

Tommy laughed and reclined against the side of her car next to her. "It was *one* time. And I distinctly remember buying you a new one."

Laney bumped her shoulder against his and added, "Yeah, well, I was partial to the old one." They were silent for a moment, and Tommy waited for the bad news, barely able to

breathe. He wanted to touch her, to tuck the curl flying in the breeze behind her ear like he used to, to hold her hand, to kiss the small crescent-moon-shaped scar on her wrist, but he forced himself to give her space—more space, more time. But he couldn't stop himself from cutting his eyes in her direction and watching as she chewed her bottom lip like she always did when she was thinking.

Maybe it was to give her more time to figure out how to say whatever it was she was struggling with, maybe it was to spare himself the pain of it for another moment longer, but Tommy said, "I'll be right back." He held his still-oily hands up as an explanation, and she nodded, relaxing a bit onto the hood of her car.

He stepped into the utility room and toward the small corner sink, wrangling his intrusive thoughts that told him all the reasons that she was obviously here to hammer the last nail into his coffin and tell him she was through. A jar of Gojo had sat there in the soap groove on one side of the sink, open and giving off the strong scent of citrus, for as long as he could remember, and he took a thick glob and rubbed it into the edges of his fingernails and the creases between his fingers, scrubbing them free of the last vestiges of black oil hidden in his skin. He washed his hands and dried them on a towel draped over the edge of the deep freezer in the one corner and counted ten deep breaths before walking back out into the bright sun.

Laney smiled when she saw him, but not the normal, casual smile he'd seen almost every day for the last four years. This one was tense around the edges, hesitant even. He reclined once again beside her and steeled himself. Clearing her throat, she leaned forward and he could already hear her saying "goodbye" in his mind. Only she didn't. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a square of folded up paper. As it unfurled, Tommy realized what he was looking at—the unmistakable grainy images of an ultrasound.

“I had another appointment yesterday, and . . . I thought, maybe, you’d want to see.” She extended the string of images toward him, still chewing her lip as if she were worried that he’d push them away.

He took them from her outstretched hand, and licked his lips, acutely aware of how dry his mouth was. At the top of each, in small type-face letters, it read, “20 WEEKS. STATLER, M.” The first one was mostly black, with only shades of gray in the center, but there, right in the middle were two undeniable little feet. He sat back down onto the hood of her car, as the world swiveled beneath him, and let out a breathy exhale with a smile. The next picture showed undecipherable blobs with an arrow pointing to seemingly nothing, labeled “*BOY*.” The last picture was a clear infant’s head, with a small up-turned nose and hands clasped beneath his chin as if he’d been posed that way.

All that he’d agonized over for the last week, all the fears that had lodged themselves through every nook and cranny of his mind like smoke, disappeared as his eyes ran back and forth over the three pictures in his hands. None of it mattered anymore. It didn’t matter if his father had been a drunk who abandoned them. It didn’t matter if Tommy didn’t know the first thing about raising a kid. All that mattered now was that it was real, it was happening; he held the proof in his hands.

“He has your nose already,” Laney said from beside him as she laid her head onto his shoulder, as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

It was hard to speak around the lump in his throat, but Tommy managed to say, “He’s perfect already.”

Laney snickered and tilted her head the other way, examining the photos. “I don’t know. He kind of looks like a potato in this one.”

He turned to face her, and her smile, pink and flawless in the sunlight dappled through the trees, was contagious. He swallowed again, restraining himself once again from reaching toward her. “The Yukon Gold comes from your side, I’m certain.”

“I was thinking more like Russet, but sure.” Her grin faded, and Tommy’s skin prickled beneath her palms as she touched his face. “I miss you.”

He closed his eyes briefly, basking in the warmth of her affection, her hands on his cheeks. “I miss you, too. More than anything.” When he opened them again, her eyes were brimming with tears.

“I want to make this work, Tommy.” Her chin quivered as she fought to keep her words even. “I don’t want to raise this baby without you, and I . . .”

“You don’t have to.” He tucked the photos into his back pocket and reached for her, brushing his hands up her elbows to her shoulders. He shook his head, knowing he was rambling but unable to stop it. “I’ll fix everything. I’ll do whatever you want, whatever you need me to do to prove it to you. I’m sorry, Laney. I’m so sorry. I fucked up, and I know I’ll never be g—”

She stopped his rambling with her lips, and all at once, Tommy could breathe again. Her kiss tasted of cherry Chapstick, and he was home, exactly where he needed to be. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and warm tears flowed across the back of his knuckles as he took her face in his hands. Everything ceased to exist but this moment, her inviting him back into her life even though he didn’t deserve it—he’d never deserve it—but he’d spend the rest of his life trying if she’d let him. He kissed her gently, but as her lips parted and she pulled him closer, he couldn’t stop. His fingertips trailed down her back, and they breathed together, wrapped around one another as if this was the only chance they’d ever get.

But all too quickly, she stopped. She didn't pull away, only looked up at him, and the rush of her exhale blew cold across his lips. Tears clung to her eyelashes, dimming the blue of her eyes in the red haze that accompanied them.

He traced his thumbs along her cheeks to dry them. "I'm so sorry, Laney. I—"

She shook her head, shushing him. She sniffed and dropped her head against his chest just as she'd done in her driveway days ago. "I forgive you."

Tommy clutched the back of her shirt, as if clinging to her would somehow show her that he'd give her the world if he could. "When can I come home?"

Her breathing hitched, and she pulled away, her gaze somewhere off in the pasture beside his driveway. "I . . . I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea just yet."

He heart sank. "But . . . you said—"

She turned back to look at him, her gaze earnest as she took her hand in his. "I'm not saying, 'no.' I'm just saying that we need to take it slow. We can't just go back as if nothing happened, Tommy. I don't think I can do that."

This wasn't the same thing as no, but it wasn't exactly the way he wanted it to be either, but what choice did he have? He dropped his gaze to their intertwined fingers and nodded. "What do you need?"

"I just . . . I just think we need to take it slow." When he didn't respond, she squeezed his hand, making him look up at her again. "I'm not trying to punish you. But I have to make sure that you're really better. It's not about just us, not anymore."

She was right, but it didn't change the sinking feeling in his gut at the thought of not only being away from her for another night but being *here* for another night as well. She pulled his

hand toward her stomach and laid it flat. With her hand on top of his, she pushed, adding just enough pressure that he started to pull his hand away thinking it would somehow hurt the baby.

“It’s okay,” she said with a watery laugh and wiped her other hand beneath her eye to dry it. “You won’t hurt him. Just . . .” She moved their hands around, trying to find the right spot. “Sometimes it takes a minute to get him to—”

The soft swell they were pressing against rolled, and his mouth fell open. It was unlike anything he’d ever felt before, his baby wiggling beneath his palm, and for a moment he was weightless, held onto the earth only by her hand on his. Surely, Laney had felt this before, but never *with* him, and the look on her face said it was just as magical to her.

It was obvious, with their baby doing somersaults beneath their hands and the wide smile she wore as she laughed at his reverence of the moment, why people always said that pregnant women glow. She was everything. For the first time since he’d stepped foot out of Creekside—or, since even before his arrest, if he were being honest—he felt hope, hope that everything was going to be okay, that they’d make it through this, and maybe he could be an all right father.

The front door opened, and the moment was stolen from him as his mother stepped out onto the porch. Laney’s smile vanished and a deep scowl took its place. Her eyes met his for a split second before she mustered a plastic smile and turned around.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Buckley.” Edie nodded once as she lit up her cigarette, but she said nothing. Her lips pursed tightly around the thin butt of her Virginia Slims like a challenge. When it became apparent that she wasn’t going to respond, Laney added, “Well, it’s been a real pleasure to see you. As always. But I’ve got to go to work.”

Edie leaned against the wrought-iron porch post and said, “Pity.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Tommy said, reaching out to take her hand again, but she was already stomping around him to get to her car door.

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Laney snatched her door open, but Tommy caught the frame in his hand. Letting out an exhale through her nose, she stopped and pinched her eyes shut.

“Could you give us a minute?” Tommy snapped at his mother. When he didn’t hear the door open again, he looked back over his shoulder and added, as calmly as he could muster, “Please.”

His mother thumped her cigarette off the porch and scowled, but she stood there for only a second longer before turning to go back inside.

Once the door closed behind her, Tommy turned back to Laney who was now standing beside her car door with her arms crossed and foot tamping. “I’m not going to hold it against you that your mother is a huge twat, but God, I hate that woman.”

Tommy glanced back over his shoulder to where his mother was peeking out from behind the curtains. She didn’t even have the decency to look away when she was caught spying. “Yeah, I know. I think I’ve figured out what she’s worried about and why she—”

“Because she’s weirdly obsessed with you and can’t understand that you’re a grown-ass man?”

Tommy sighed. There was no winning this argument, with either of them.

“I’m sorry,” Laney said. “I know you can’t help it who your family is. As horrible as she is, she’s your mother, and she’s all that you’ve got. I would never ask you to choose between us.”

A sentiment Tommy was certain his mother wouldn’t agree with. He pulled her to him again, wanting nothing more than to keep her there in his arms forever. She was tenser than before, but she let him hold her for a second before she sighed and sank into him.

“All that being said, I can’t spend time with you here.”

“That’s fine by me, I hate it here.” He hadn’t meant to say it, not wanting to manipulate her decision to not allow him to move back in yet, but it slipped out before he could stop himself.

“I know you do.” She tucked her hands into his back pockets, and they stood that way for a moment, with the wind blowing her ponytail into his face and Tommy trying to drag it out as long as possible. When she finally pulled away, she had the strip of photographs in her hand from out of his pocket.

“You can keep these; I have about a hundred more. My parents wanted some and all the girls at work, so I had them give me a few extra copies.” She smoothed out the wrinkles from where he’d shoved them into his pants before and folded them back up. “I’d kinda forgotten how sexy you look in your dirty jeans and backwards ballcap.” She turned his hat backwards again, as it had been when she’d pulled up, and tucked the photos back into his pants, giving him a playful squeeze just over where she’d slid them into his back pocket.

He hooked his fingers into her belt loops and tugged her toward him, unable to stop the smirk that spread across his face. She rose up onto her tiptoes to kiss him again but pulled away when he tried to deepen it this time.

Tommy breathed in the smell of her as she laid her forehead against his. “Can I cook you dinner tomorrow?”

Laney laughed and turned away from him. She opened the door and slipped into the driver’s seat. “Well, if we’d like an edible meal, then maybe I should cook you dinner.” After he closed the door for her, she laid her hand on top of his on the open window frame. “But I’d love that.”

As she drove away, honking her horn once as she pulled from his driveway, Tommy could still taste her lips on the smile he was helpless to. He walked on air back into his house, a lightness blooming in his chest that he'd forgotten existed. He could do this, prove to her that he could be the man she needed him to be, even if it took him a lifetime to do it. She was worth that and so much more. She and their son both were.

When he opened the door and stepped inside the kitchen, his foot stopped mid-air. His mother sat at her usual spot at the kitchen table, the lines around her lips further deepened by the heavy scowl she wore as she stared down at the crossword puzzle she was pretending to finish. The high he'd been riding for the last ten minutes faded as if doused in water, the smoke of the flames rising in his chest in the same righteous anger that seemed to plague him any time his mother interacted with Laney.

He wadded the now dampened dishtowel up and slapped it down onto the counter, his eyes never leaving his mother's face. He stood there, arms crossed over his chest, waiting for her to acknowledge him, but of course, in true Edie Buckley fashion, she didn't. Her eyes were trained on the book in front of her. She even really doubled down by actually scratching a few answers into the little gray boxes that covered the page.

"Well?" Tommy asked, gritting his teeth to keep from raising his voice.

His mother gave a questioning *hmm* in response, but once again, she never looked up.

"Would it kill you to just be pleasant to her?"

"It might." Finally she lifted her face, and her eyes were the same cold daggers she'd had any time they had this conversation. "And I'm not willing to risk it."

Tommy's humorless laugh as he shook his head at her made her lift her eyebrow in challenge.

“I guess she took you back, if the canoodling is any indication. Out there swapping spit like two ruttin’ teenagers in front of God and everybody else.” She looked back down at her puzzle and wrote something in the blocks—there’s no way she was even writing actual words—before adding, “She certainly don’t look pregnant. You sure she ain’t just tryin’ to trap you with some cockamamie story about a baby?”

Tommy forced himself to breathe before responding. His hands gripped the countertop behind him so tightly that his knuckles popped. “Mom, we talked about this.”

“What? I didn’t *say* anything bad about her. Wasn’t that the stipulation? I couldn’t say anything bad about her. I’m just”—she lifted a hand, waving it flippantly in the air toward him—“having a conversation with my son.”

This was their way, it always had been. His mother pushed his buttons any time he didn’t immediately comply with whatever it was she wanted from him. His heart thudded in his chest, but he once again fought against his baser instincts. He let out a breath and reminded himself of all that he’d learned from Dr. Parsons. She was a manipulator, maybe even a narcissist, but she *was* his mother. And he couldn’t continue down the same path they’d been dancing down for his entire life. He wouldn’t bend to her will, but he also wouldn’t take the bait she was throwing at him.

“Yes, she took me back. So I’ll be moving back home some—”

His mother’s head shot up the moment *home* left his mouth. For a split second, with her eyes wide and the pencil gripped in her fingers, she looked frightened, but just as quickly, the expression passed, and she nodded before quickly looking back down.

Tommy went to the table where she was sitting and removed the ultrasound photos from his back pocket. Putting them down onto his mother's book, directly in her line of sight. "Yes, I'm sure she's pregnant."

The pencil she'd been holding dropped from her grasp, and she reached for the photos, hesitating just before her fingers touched the thin receipt-like paper. After her initial reluctance, she unfolded them and left them lying open on the tabletop. With one fingertip she traced across the little feet before moving onto the photo with the baby's face.

"He has your nose," she said.

"That's what Laney—" His mother had started to lift the photos from the table, to get a closer look presumably, when a loud bang shot from the living room. "What the he—"

He started in that direction, but his mother grabbed him by the hand, her ice-cold fingers digging in just above his wrist. She shook her head, her eyes wide and wild. He tugged his arm from her grasp and said, "Mom, it's okay. Something just hit the side of the house." He frowned down at her as she shook her head again, her palms now covering her ears. She looked so much like a child then, a frail, gray-haired child, that he couldn't leave her. He took her hands in his and pulled them away from her ears.

"Mom, it's okay," he repeated. When she stopped looking around the room, waiting for something to jump from the shadows, and turned to face him again, he gently tugged her up from her seat and toward the living room. Her grip tightened in his hand, but she continued walking. A long set of windows sat directly across from the kitchen doorway, the same windows she'd been snooping from less than a half hour ago, and in the middle of the left-most, there was a dark smudge. When they walked closer, Tommy saw there were tiny blue-black bird feathers mixed in with the smudge that he could now recognize as small spattering of blood.

“It was just a bird. See?” He pointed toward the window, but his mother’s eyes were staring past him and down the hallway. He whipped around to follow her gaze, his own heart now racing, but, of course, there was nothing there. He opened the curtains the rest of the way, but one side of the living room was still dim. He took her face in his hands and tilted her head up to look at him. “It isn’t real, Mom. Whatever you see, it isn’t real. This”—he took her hand again and gripped it with his own—“this is real. It was just a bird.”

Slowly, the hazy, fearful expression in Edie’s face began to fade, but she kept glancing down the hallway as if she expected someone to come walking out of the darkness any moment. “Just a bird,” she said, her voice distraught. “Just a bird.” She shook his hand loose and walked back into the kitchen, leaving him standing alone with the smattered bits of bird and thick darkness of the hallway. He gave it one last glance before he followed her.

She’d returned to her seat and taken the pencil in hand again, leaving the photos discarded beside her book. Tommy folded them back into a square, but his focus was still on his mother.

“Are you o—”

“I’m fine.” She took a cigarette from the leather pouch beside her and lit it up, making Tommy step back to get out of the trail of smoke rising around her.

He hesitated, ensuring that the moment had passed for her, and then said, “Okay, then. Umm, I have AA later, so I’ll grab some dinner out. Are you going to church tonight?” Edie’s brow furrowed as she looked up at him again.

“Do you not do Friday night service anymore?” His mother had been attending Friday night worship, Sunday morning Bible study, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting for as long as he could remember. He’d jokingly told people they’d been stuck at church more than the preacher herself had been. *Every time the doors were open.*

“Oh, yes. I do,” she said, blinking up at him as if he’d been speaking a different language.

“O–kay. Guess I’ll see you tomorrow then, I’m sure I’ll be in bed when you get back home.” She turned back to her puzzle, and Tommy walked out of the kitchen with the definite impression that his mother was lying to him. He shook away the thought. He didn’t care what she did with her free time. She could be spending Friday night at her holy-rolling church, with the tambourines and shofars, or out on Lock Four with Peasy for all he cared . . . well, that wasn’t exactly true. The thought of his mother with Peasy made him cringe and then laugh to himself as he walked into his bedroom.

He lifted his towel off the hook on the back of his door and took a change of clothes from his drawers before setting them down onto the edge of his bed. Before heading for a shower, he paused long enough to tuck the ultrasound photos into the edge of the small mirror hanging above his dresser. The edges dipped just beneath the ornate weaving of the frame and hung there, obscuring half his face from his line of sight, and as he stared into the granular black-and-gray images, Samuel’s words popped into his mind.

I’m going to take care of you, Tommy thought. And you’ll never wonder if anyone loves you. He’d never meant a promise more than he meant that one.

Chapter Six

Tommy tiptoed through the front door, a baseball bat slung over one shoulder and glove tucked between his scrawny biceps and ribcage, and eased it shut behind him, careful to not rattle the knob too much. He peeked his head around the frame of the opening between the kitchen and living room, expecting to see his father’s scowling face staring back at him, but the hallway was empty. Dad’s truck was in the driveway, a strange sight at four in the afternoon, as he wasn’t

normally home until just before supper, leaving Tommy plenty enough time to watch *Dragon Ball Z* before he needed to be out of sight.

He crept down the dimly-lit hallway, his heart in his throat. He'd given his mother his report card the night before, and the D in Math was sure to give his father a reason to notice him today. Tommy made it to his bedroom and propped his bat up in the corner by the foot of his bed, balancing the glove atop the knob at the end. He pushed his door closed and quickly but quietly changed his clothes before throwing his sweaty, red-clay-stained dirties into the laundry bag hanging from the hook on the back of his door. He still hadn't heard a sound in the house, not even his mother sewing or puttering around the house even though her car was in the drive too, but as long as nobody was shouting at him, Tommy didn't care where they were. Samuel was still at work, so Tommy decided to just stay out of the rest of the house until his mother came in from whatever she must've been doing outside.

An hour passed, and then two, as Tommy sat sketching on his bed, trying to emulate the pages of the comic books scattered across his comforter. The clock on his wall *ticked* until he was ready to throw a pillow at it, but he didn't dare turn on his radio. He frowned at the clock on his nightstand—6:47. They should have all been here by now. *Heck, Mom should already be cooking, even*, he thought just as his stomach gave a deep growl.

He opened his bedroom door, just a crack at first to make sure his father wasn't there, but then wider when all that he found was the empty, darkened hallway. He took a step out of his bedroom door and padded silently down the hall in his socked feet. He always hated this hallway. As the sun dipped down beneath the edges of the windows that illuminated the living room, the hallway grew darker and darker until you could almost feel it pressing in around you, breathing against the soft hair on the back of your neck or whispering into your ear. But Tommy knew

there was nothing there. There was nothing to fear in the dark. It was just his hallway, same as during the day. He swallowed, ignoring the feel of his blood pounding in his ears, as he tiptoed back down the hallway.

The living room was dark too, with only a hint of red-orange sunlight streaming in through the curtains, making the couch and hardwood floor in front of it appear to be glowing hot like embers in a fire pit.

“Mom?” Tommy said, hoping Samuel wasn’t somewhere in there and hearing the way his voice quavered. “Are you home?”

There was no answer. He flipped on the light switch just inside the kitchen, and his eyes stung in the bright light. “Mom? Are you—”

He rounded the opposite side of the kitchen, where the floor dropped two feet down a tiny set of stairs into the room they referred to as the den, and there his mother sat, engulfed in darkness, her back straight as an arrow, staring directly at the wall straight ahead of her.

“Mom?” Tommy asked again, taking the two stairs down into the room, minding the small lip on the first that always managed to catch the toe of his sneaker. “Mom.” His mother continued to stare unblinkingly ahead of her, her eyes glued on nothing in particular, just the dark brown wood paneling on the wall. Tommy’s heart gave a lurch as the floor beneath his feet creaked. This felt wrong, like catching his mother in the bathroom or something, like he shouldn’t be seeing her this way, but he couldn’t just leave her sitting there in the darkness. He walked closer to her, his knees quivering and ears ringing. There was a rancid smell in the air like rotting cabbage, and it hung in the back of his throat until he could almost taste it.

Her hands were in her lap, and her skin looked pallid . . . her whole form rubbery and unreal beneath the pale yellow light peeking through the blinds and lining her face in strips. Dust

motes floating in front of her unblinking face. She reminded Tommy of the wax figures they'd seen on vacation once. His mother had taken them—just him and Samuel, of course—to the Smokies last summer, and they'd gone to Madam Toussad's. The figures looked almost human but not quite right, like something about their features were just slightly off, but he couldn't figure out what. Their peculiar faces, with their too-wide smiles and shiny, waxen skin, had made a six-year-old Tommy cling to his brother's hand like some sort of baby, and now, stepping closer to his mother in the pale stream of light with the ever-encroaching darkness at her back, the same whimper clawed up his chest and into his throat.

He didn't want to get her attention, but he knew he had to. He took the last step toward her and reached forward, ignoring the shaking in his fingers. The moment his fingers grazed the back of her hand, her head snapped toward him, and her eyes, they weren't the same hazel that belonged to his mother. They were black and empty, all pupil with barely any white surrounding them, and Tommy seized backward. Her talon-like hand wrapped around his wrist and held him there like a vise as a scream tore out of her throat. It was unlike anything he'd ever heard before, a guttural growl that grew like a wind turbine, like the yowl of the alarm they'd rang in the town square last fall during the emergency drill—it started off small, way down deep in her stomach until the shriek was so loud that it rattled his bones.

Her mouth grew wider, splitting a chasm across her face until he was staring down the black void into nothing, nothing, nothing. She was going to devour him. She was pulling him toward her, and any minute she'd consume him, swallow him into the vacuum of her throat, and he felt his bladder let go.

Tommy sat straight up in bed with the gasp of a man drowning, his legs tangling in the sheets, and he smacked his head on the headboard. His hands slapped at nothing, shaking off the bird-like claws of his mother's that weren't really there.

Not my mother. That wasn't my mother.

The smell still hung in the air, that fetid sweetness of something rotten, but on his next breath, it was gone, not even a hint of it left in the air. He blinked in the darkness, finally seeing the faint outline of his dresser and towel hanging on the back of his door. Despite knowing it was a dream, his heart rate didn't start to calm until he looked to the foot of his bed and found the corner empty—no bat and glove. Of course, there was no bat and glove. It was just a dream. But his hands were still shaking, and he realized he'd almost pissed his sheets. He fumbled around his nightstand, knocking a glass of water to the floor—blessedly empty—and it hit the rug with a heavy thud. His skin brushed against the touch lamp, and his room was instantly illuminated. He tapped it again—three times more to get to the highest setting—and looked around his room.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, counting again—*four, four, eight, four, four, eight*—and blowing each out through his mouth. When his heart returned to some semblance of normal and the tightness in his chest loosened, he turned, throwing the sheets off and putting his feet on the floor. Shaking the last of the dream from his mind, he rubbed circles over his eyelids and then ran his fingers through his hair, pushing the cold, sweaty strands away from his face. He stood up, thanking his lucky stars that he hadn't actually wet the bed like a baby.

He walked from his room and into the bathroom, forcing his feet to move slowly despite the childish urge to run for the bathroom light switch. For about the third time in as many days, Tommy reminded himself that he wasn't a child. *Grow up.*

After relieving the nagging pressure in his bladder, he washed his hands and his face, shaking the droplets of water loose like he always did even though Laney would've thrown a hand towel over his shoulder and called him a neanderthal for it. With a sigh, he wiped the mirror and the back of the sink with a flowery towel, drying all the evidence of his caveman-like habits.

A sharp scream cut through the air, and Tommy jerked, raining his mother's perfume bottles and his own razor down onto the floor. His blood turned to ice in his veins, and he hesitated for only a second longer before the scream sounded again, this time punctuated by a loud thud on the other side of the bathroom door. He threw it open just as the sound turned to a sob, and he realized the sound wasn't coming from the hallway but his mother's bedroom. For one wild second, Tommy wanted to run away, the fear of his dream returning with vivid force to match the shriek in the otherwise silent house, but that was crazy. His dream hadn't been real, but this was. In one step across the hallway, he flung her door open, half-expecting to find her wide-mouthed nothingness on the other side of it, but of course, all that he found was his mother thrashing in her sleep.

He flipped the switch on the wall beside her door, but the light didn't come on. It still hadn't come on after he flicked it up and down a few times for good measure before giving it up and approaching his mother's now-whimpering form. The smell was back, hanging thick in the air, and he gagged on it.

"Mom," he said, shaking her wrist, surprised for a half-second that it wasn't the same child-like voice he'd had in his dream. He cleared his throat and said it again as he sat down on the edge of her bed. Her eyes were pinched shut, illuminated in lines by the moonlight through the blinds just as she'd been in his dream, and a cold chill swept through him. But here she

wasn't the uncanny valley version of herself she'd been in his dream. She was just his mother, fighting against invisible hands in her sleep.

When he brushed the hair from her skin—her curls clinging to her forehead and neck like graying seaweed—she stilled.

“Mom, it's okay. It's just a dream,” he said, reassuring himself as much as her. When he breathed in again, the smell was gone, and he was sure he'd imagined it. *Get a grip, Tommy.*

“You're okay.”

His mother whimpered one last time as she curled in on herself. She rolled onto her side and tucked her knees up to her chest, her hands pressed together as if in prayer between her thighs. She mumbled something, and Tommy leaned closer to her.

Before he could ask her what she'd said, she whispered, thick and muffled, barely audible over the thumping of his heart, “Samuel.” Tommy let go of her wrist and breathed. She was still dreaming, but at least it wasn't whatever horrible nightmare she'd been having before. Tommy thought of his own and wondered who plagued her dreams.

“Samuel,” she said again, her voice hoarse but a little louder this time. “You have to.”

“Have to what, Mom?” He shook her again, gently, barely moving her arm unlike the way he'd been trying to wake her before. “Have to what?”

But a soft exhale told him she was done speaking. Even in her sleep, Edie Buckley held onto her secrets.

The next morning, Tommy sipped a tepid black coffee at the kitchen table, knowing he'd be paying for the three cups of coffee before six a.m. later today. He'd never gone back to sleep. He'd stared at the ceiling above his bed until four, when he'd finally just gotten up and made a

pot of coffee. He knew without even looking that the dark circles under his eyes had dark circles under their eyes, and despite the caffeine, his whole body felt weighed down, like his boots were made of lead, along with his limbs.

His mother's bedroom door creaked open, and he could hear her in the bathroom. He'd already straightened all the toiletries he knocked over the night before on the bathroom counter, just another one of the mindless tasks he found himself doing before the sun rose this morning. When she came into the kitchen, she stopped briefly in the doorway, her brow furrowing as she looked at him.

"You look like hell," she said, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

She didn't look so hot herself. She had bags beneath her eyes that probably rivaled his own, and her skin was pale.

"You were done in bed when I got home, but your light was off. You didn't sleep much?" She poured coffee into her travel mug and added a bit of milk from the fridge.

"Not enough," he said, draining the last of his cup. The dredges at the bottom, just a bit of coffee grounds that escaped the filter when he'd first dumped it in this morning, looked like some ridiculous Rorschach test. Tommy turned his cup to the side and tried to find something recognizable in the watery mess, but he only saw coffee. "How'd you sleep?"

His mother stopped and furrowed her brow. After a pause, she said, "I slept okay, I think. I was dead to the world all night long at least."

Tommy remembered the smell from his dream, the same one he'd smelled in both his room and hers for just a split second. *Something smelled dead, alright.* He suppressed a shudder, the feeling his middle school friends used to say was someone walking over your grave and

stood to put his cup in the sink. He made a mental note to mention it to Dr. Parsons later at their meeting.

“I’ve got a short shift this morning, so I’ll be home around noon. Maybe you ought to take a nap or something.” His mother hiked her purse’s strap further up on her shoulder and waited for him to nod before walking out the door. A clap of thunder echoed through the house just as rain began to pelt the tin roof. Tommy let out a sigh that seemed to take everything out of him. He pulled back the curtain from the window above the sink, and a sheet of rain greeted him. At least his mother had made it to the car before the bottom fell out of it. So much for mowing the yard and working on getting that damn tree cut down though. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck inside this house all morning, but with the rain pelting down against the roof, he really had no other choice.

He walked down the hallway, not caring how ridiculous he looked flipping the light switch on as he walked past it. There was nobody here to worry about seeing him look like a child too afraid of the dark to walk down a dim hallway when he was home alone. He glanced toward Samuel’s room and then toward his own. He shook out his hands then took a calming breath. With determined steps he opened the door and walked inside for the second time that week.

Light streamed in through the curtains, thankfully on the morning-sun side of the house, and despite the rain, it was still at least mostly lit. He didn’t bother with the rest of his brother’s things this time; he headed straight for the circular table in front of the door and lifted the table skirt. They were there exactly where he’d left them before, Samuel’s stack of journals, and he grabbed the next two off the top, hesitating for just a moment to consider whether he should just take them all. He thought better of it, mainly because he didn’t have somewhere to hide a whole

stack of them and dropped the curtain back to the floor. He straightened the hem and walked out without another look back.

Chapter Seven

A few hours later, Tommy sat in Dr. Parsons's office, a different office on the other side of town now that he was no longer in-patient. This office was nicer, quite a bit larger, and there was no longer the faint smell of antiseptic in the air. Here, photos of Dr. Parsons's wife and son sat on his desk, golden-framed and full of smiling faces, and degrees and accolades hung on the wall in rows.

"It's great to see you, Thomas. How has your first week back in your normal life been?" Dr. Parsons removed his glasses and set them onto the desk in front of him. He had the same penetrating gaze he'd had before, not unkind at all, but still as if he were looking directly into Tommy's soul. He tilted his head and gave Tommy a soft smile.

"It's been fine." When Dr. Parsons continued looking at him, he knew he was meant to go on. "A bit tense, living at home with my mother again, but I expected that."

"The tension or to be living at home with your mother?"

"The tension. I . . ." Tommy licked his lips. "I guess a small part of me expected to be living there too. Laney didn't talk to me at all while I was at Creekside, not that I blame her or anything, so I guess I should've known that was coming." He folded his ankle across his knee and tapped his thumb against shin, but Dr. Parsons said nothing again. "But, hopefully that's just temporary. We talked and . . . she doesn't think it's a good idea to just move back in right now, but eventually. We're"—he rubbed the back of his neck—"taking it slow."

Dr. Parsons cleared his throat and nodded. “I think that’s a good idea. I’m sure you’re anxious to get on with your life and get back to normal, so to speak, but most people in my profession recommend their patients not get into a relationship immediately following their time in an in-patient facility.” Tommy started to speak but Dr. Parsons lifted a hand. “I know, your situation isn’t exactly the same as *starting a new relationship*, but I still want to caution you. Generally speaking, that suggestion is to avoid codependency for individuals with substance abuse disorders, and as that’s not your situation, it makes your case a bit more unique. That being said, you should be careful. As Laney said, you need to move slowly.”

He was right, but that didn’t make it any less depressing to hear. Tommy frowned, looking at his shoes. “She’s pregnant.” He half expected the man to ask the same asinine question that he and his mother had both asked upon hearing the news, but, of course, he didn’t. Dr. Parsons folded his hands together in front of him and asked, “And how you do feel about that?”

It was the most stereotypical therapy question, and it made Tommy chuckle. “Terrified.” He took a deep breath and lifted his shoulders. “I don’t know the first thing about being a father, or babies, or any of that. I don’t know anything.” He picked at one cuticle as warmth crawled up his face. “I didn’t exactly have a good example of that.”

A soft laugh made him look up. His doctor was smiling fondly, and he turned another photograph around to face Tommy. It was an old sepia-toned image of a man in a bow tie and a woman with a bouffant, both smiling at one another with a small tow-headed boy standing between them. “I had a pretty good example of what a father should be, Thomas. And the very first thought that ran through my mind when my wife told me we were expecting, was ‘What the hell do I do?’ I was just as terrified as you are.” Dr. Parsons nodded again. “All that to say, what

you're feeling is totally normal, expected even. You've come a long way, and I think you have exactly the tools necessary to be a good father."

Tommy felt an unexpected swelling of warmth in his chest. This is just the conversation he'd wanted to have with his mother, the words he'd wanted her to say when he told her he was going to be a father. He'd wanted comfort, something normal for a change; he'd wanted his mother to tell him that everything was going to be okay, but she hadn't. Now, hearing the words from someone else, someone who, three months ago, had been a complete stranger to him, Tommy had to clear his own throat and look down at the carpet for a second before he could meet the man's warm expression again. "Thank you," he said, grateful that his words came out unwavering.

"So," Dr. Parsons's began, "where is the tension you mentioned before? Is that with your mother or with the living in your childhood home? What's making it difficult for you?"

Tommy sat up straighter, eager to move the conversation to safer territories that didn't involve him becoming stupidly emotional. "Both. My mother is . . . well, my mother, and she's never been the easiest woman to live with. But also, just being there . . . it brings back a lot of stuff from when I was a kid."

"Like?"

"Well, I've been having trouble sleeping, and I've had a few"—he frowned, not sure how to say what he was trying to say without seeming like he needed to be committed again—

"episodes."

Dr. Parsons's contemplative expression deepened. "Could you explain those for me?"

“Yeah, I . . . saw something strange in my driveway, but I was able to use some of the things you told me about to”—he waved a hand in front of him, twisting it in the air to show it wasn’t that important—“make it go away. And then, I had a nightmare last night, and—” Tommy laughed to himself, remembering how terrified he’d been when he awoke and then afterward, when he lay awake staring at the ceiling for half the night. “It’s stupid really. It was just a dream.” The image of his mother’s gaping mouth filled his head, and he added, “But it was hard to shake.”

“Being back in an environment that is the source of so much of your . . . trauma, can bring with it quite a bit of stress and anxiety, both of which can be a trigger for your schizophrenia. But the fact that you were able to push through and reassure yourself of reality should make you feel extremely proud. That’s a difficult thing to do. I don’t think it’s necessary at this point, but do you think we need to adjust your medication?”

Tommy shook his head. “No, I’m already having trouble sleeping, I don’t want to make that worse.”

“How much sleep are you getting? Anti-psychotics can make it difficult to sleep if you take them too late at night, but we can certainly try a different medication if this one is making it—”

“No, no, I don’t want to change medications.”

“What about trying a sleeping aid? That could help to—”

Tommy lifted a hand to stop him, and Dr. Parsons stopped speaking and shuffling through a small stack of papers on his desk. “No,” he said, harsher than he intended. He quickly cleared his throat and added, “It’s not that bad. I just . . . I can handle it. I think it’s like you said, just stress of being back at home and being around my mother, and then, I found these journals that

my brother had, and I think that's been bringing up a lot of stuff about our dad and—and Samuel, and just . . . I can handle it.”

Tommy looked up and Dr. Parsons was staring at him intently again, his hands steeped in front of his mouth. He nodded in understanding before saying, “Tell me more about these journals.”

He'd taken two more of them, but couldn't bring himself to read them this morning, not after the dream last night and the way it had all felt so real. Instead, he lay in bed staring at the covers. Laney told him that they couldn't just act like nothing happened; they couldn't just go back to the way things were before, and Tommy thought, maybe, by reading Samuel's journals he could start to forgive his brother for the decision he made. And forgiving him would be the first step in moving forward.

“You remember that quote you said a few months ago, I'm sure I'm butchering it, but something like, ‘If you don't heal from the things that hurt you then you bleed all over people who didn't cut you.’” Dr. Parsons nodded, so Tommy went on. “Well, it . . . it hurts reading some of the things that he wrote, but at the same time, I think it'll help me to forgive him maybe. To be able to understand his decision more.”

Tommy looked out the window beside him. The storm from this morning had passed, leaving behind a humidity so thick it felt oppressive, and wavy heat lines rose from the dark asphalt in the parking lot. But Dr. Parsons's voice drew his attention again.

“I think that's a good idea, Thomas. If you find anything in those specifically that you'd like to discuss with me, you can bring them to our next meeting. But I do think that's a big step that you're taking.” He looked down, and Tommy couldn't recall the man ever hesitating, as if he felt he was overstepping. With a sigh, he looked back up and said, “You successfully managed

three full months of therapy with me without really speaking about your brother's suicide at all. Do you think you're ready to talk about that with me? Or maybe just your relationship with him."

He'd kept that part of himself hidden, locked away from even Dr. Parsons. It wasn't something he liked thinking about, so talking about it was out of the question. But he couldn't do that forever. It had been almost twenty-five years . . . certainly long enough that he *should* be over it by now. He shouldn't still wake up from dreams of them and forget for an instant that he was gone. He shouldn't still miss him. It was ridiculous. He wasn't even the same person he'd been when Samuel left, and yet, thinking about him made Tommy feel like a child all over again. To be good enough for Laney and their son, he'd have to do the hard things, and that started with moving past Samuel's death.

So he told him, speaking the words aloud for the first time in his life about how much his brother had meant to him, how he'd been more than a brother, and how his death had changed his own life, his mother's life, their relationship, and really Tommy's whole world. He was the only person in Tommy's life who had ever made him feel loved, until Laney. And without him, Tommy had spent the majority of his life alone. Alone and angry at being betrayed by the one person who promised him he never would.

"He said in that first journal that he'd always take care of me, and he lied. He lied to me. He—he . . . he didn't take care of me. He left me." Tommy fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, folding the fabric between his fingers, looking anywhere except for Dr. Parsons's face while he shared this part of himself that he'd never shared with anyone before. "And even before that—he—he changed."

"What do you mean, 'he changed'?"

Tommy hated revisiting the dream, but parts of it were true. Thankfully, his mother had never turned into some sort of monster that tried to eat him, but she had been sitting there, still as a statue and staring at the wall as if it held some sort of secret.

He shook her hand twice, squirming through his desire to run from the room altogether; but she blinked a few times as if rising from sleep and looked at him. She wasn't really seeing him though, not at first. His mother's eyes, misty hazel, stared right through him as if he weren't there for a moment.

"Mom," he said again, and her face cleared. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, I was . . . just lost in thought." She smiled at him, but it was a grimace, forced and unnatural on her face. "When did you get home?"

"I've been home for hours. Where's Samuel? Where's dad?"

At the mention of his father, Edie's face hardened. "I don't know where he is." She stood and, without another word, shuffled into the kitchen. Tommy remained there alone in the darkness of the den, his hand still hanging in mid-air above where his mother had been sitting, his mind reeling.

He sat in the chair where she'd been and picked up the remote, absently scrolling through the channels with the sound of running water and pots clanging on the stove rattled down the steps and into his ears. He landed on Spongebob, and he sat there watching but not really seeing what was going on on the screen. At the first commercial break, the kitchen door slammed shut, and Tommy heard Samuel's familiar footfalls. He leapt from the chair and ran into the kitchen just as Samuel's back disappeared around the entryway and into the living room.

He sprinted after him, ignoring his mother telling him not to run in the house, and grabbed the tail of his brother's flannel shirt as he started into the bathroom. Samuel turned to

face him, and Tommy took a step backward. Just like with his mother before, there was something different about the way Samuel looked, but he wasn't sure what. His hair was the same as it always looked—a bit disheveled but always in that devil-may-care way that Tommy could never quite master—and he smelled like fry oil just like he always did after working all day at Burger King. But there was something in his eyes that wasn't quite right, something that made Tommy pull away from him.

“Something's wrong with mom. She was just staring at the wall, and—”

“She looks fine to me,” Samuel said, turning away from him again to walk into the bathroom, but Tommy stopped him, feeling silly at the way he'd been afraid of him for a split second. This was his brother. His best friend.

“And, what about dad? His truck's in the driveway but he's not here and—”

Samuel grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and slammed his back against the wall, hard enough to rattle his teeth and the photographs hanging on the wall above him. All the air left his lungs in a breathy oof as Samuel's palm pressed into his chest.

“Don't you ever talk about him to me again, you hear? He's gone.”

Samuel's lips were chapped, and Tommy couldn't breathe as Samuel shook him by the collar of his shirt again.

“Do you hear me? He left us, and he's never coming back, so don't ever talk about him again.”

Tommy couldn't have responded if he tried, so he just nodded, his ears ringing and a knot in his stomach so tight that he was worried he'd throw up right there on his mother's hallway runner.

“Good.” Samuel let go of his shirt and turned away without another word, and Tommy had just enough time to get to his bedroom before the tears fell.

“Why do you think he did that?” Dr. Parsons asked, and Tommy shifted in his seat. He’d asked himself that question for years, and even now, over twenty years later, that same coiling knot tightened in his stomach.

“I don’t know.” He reached for the water Dr. Parsons offered him and gulped half the bottle, taking the time he was drinking to dampen the feeling the shame rising up in his chest just like it had on that day when he’d sat in his bedroom and cried, trying to do it as quietly as possible so that his brother wouldn’t hear him. Tommy wiped his cheek with one shoulder. Samuel had been his protector, his fiercest ally, standing up for him when their father called him a *sissy* or taking him out for ice cream after his parents had yet another brawl. But after that moment, it all changed.

“But he was different after that. He’d been seeing things before then, demons, he called them, that was part of the reason he and our father fought so much. Dale had hated them, all of them, that much was clear by his angry raving and long bouts of silence, but when Samuel’s mental illness made him jump at shadows, it had been too much for Dale. That’s the only thing Tommy could think of that would make him mad enough to actually leave.

“But after our dad left, even that got worse. He was either holed up in his room or screaming about whatever it was he was scared of. And . . .”

Tommy hesitated again. Dr. Parsons was the most understanding person he’d ever met, and truly he felt like he could tell him anything but believing that and actually doing it were two different things. Admitting out loud to someone that his mother and brother would lock him inside the hall closet to “protect” him was even further than he was willing to go.

“And he didn’t really talk to me much after that.”

Dr. Parsons waited for Tommy to go on, but there was nothing left to say. He felt like a wrung out sponge. He’d always heard that it was important to let things out, hell, Dr. Parsons had told him that very thing enough times, but Tommy thought it was bullshit. He didn’t feel better after saying it all out loud. He just felt empty.

Chapter Eight

For the rest of the day, Tommy felt drained, like it took every last ounce of his strength just to keep moving. The only thing that spurred him forward was knowing that he’d be seeing Laney that night. So hours later, with a stupid teddy bear and bouquet of flowers, he stood outside her door, second guessing everything. His palms were sweaty, so he jostled the bow-tie wearing fluffy bear to his other hand with the flowers and wiped his free hand down the front of his jeans before switching everything around and repeating the process with the other hand. Tommy knew nothing whatsoever about flowers, though he knew enough to understand that different ones meant different things. He’s strongly considered roses but ultimately decided they were too romantic for the occasion. Daisies seemed the safer option.

The jittery feeling inside of his chest made him queasy, and he knew he shouldn’t have skipped lunch. Why did this feel so different? He’d had dinner with her a thousand times, had cooked her dinner . . . he’d *lived in this house* with her. So why was he sweating like he a prom date? With a deep breath, he steeled himself.

Because I can’t screw this up, that’s why.

He lifted his hand to knock when a car door slammed to his left. He glanced over, and Mrs. Baker, their elderly widow neighbor, was heavily shadowed beneath the light of her front

porch. Based on the stare she was giving him as she stood outside her front door, Tommy was certain the scowl she wore had less to do with the halo of gnats and moths circling around her heavily-coiffed beehive and more with the nasty things she'd heard about "that crazy boy next door."

Tommy waved. "Hi, Mrs. Baker."

She tilted her thick frames down her nose, narrowing her eyes at him from her porch to Laney's. She shifted her head from side to side and her scowl morphed into a sneer of open disdain that only elderly women—in Tommy's experience, mostly librarians and school teachers—mastered.

"How are—?"

Before Tommy could finish his question, Mrs. Baker stepped inside and slammed her door.

"Well, that's nice," he said. First the old men at the gas station, and now his own neighbor. He'd shared a cup of tea with Mrs. Baker on more than one occasion, had sat with her on the very porch she'd just scowled at him from while he long-tailed tabby weaved figure-eights through his legs. He'd underestimated the power of a small town. Of course, everyone knew, especially Mrs. Baker. He faintly remembered seeing her standing by her front door on the night he'd been arrested, a shawl wrapped around her thin shoulders they wheeled him, strapped onto a stretcher, into the ambulance.

The front door opened, dragging his attention from the neighboring house and to his own—*Laney's . . . not mine*. Laney's smile widened at the sight of him, and the weight that had settled into the pit of his stomach lightened ever so slightly.

"I thought I heard you out here. Who are you talking to?"

Tommy tipped his head toward the next yard. “Mrs. Baker . . . she ummm . . . she didn’t exactly talk back.”

Laney’s brows dipped on either side in the look of pity that always made Tommy’s insides squirm. “It’s fine. I get it,” he added quickly, and thrust the flowers and bear out toward her before she could remotely bequeath him of the guilt he deserved. “Here, these are for you.”

“Well, Thomas Buckley, you’ve never bought me flowers before.” She took them from his hands and immediately smelled one of the bright yellow daisies peeking out above the tissue paper.

“That’s not true. I got you flowers all the time,” he said, an air of feigned indignance in his voice.

Laughing, Laney stepped to one side, wordlessly inviting him in. As she shut the door behind him, she said, “Cuttin’ stray roses from my mama’s yard does not count. And it’s liable to get you shot in this part of the country.”

Tommy laughed too, the tension draining from his shoulders. Halle Statler was not a woman to be trifled with, and Tommy, on the very first time he’d met her no less, had unknowingly done a bit of trifling. Not realizing the grave sin he was committing, he snipped a few fat, pink roses with his pocket knife while he and Laney strolled through her parents’ garden. Laney turned around to find him already halfway through the act just as Mrs. Statler’s gasp, loud as breaking china, snapped through the late afternoon air. “Definitely didn’t go over well with your mother,” he said with a shudder, remembering the fire in the woman’s eyes. She may have been a foot shorter than him, but Mrs. Statler would always be a bit formidable thanks to his very first encounter with her.

“I’d say not.” Laney walked into the kitchen, and Tommy followed, pleased to see that she hadn’t changed anything. The same pictures decorated their fridge, most of the two of them together, and his favorite coffee mug still hung from a hook beneath the cabinet by the pot, along with hers. A sigh of relief escaped him to see that she’d kept the house the same, as if she’d just been waiting for him to come home just as much as he’d been.

“‘Those are award winning roses, I’ll have you know.’ I was just happy she was yelling at you about her silly roses and not me. I heard that mess enough growing up.” Laney filled a vase with water, the one they’d found at a yard sale down the street when they first bought the place, and trimmed a few inches off the bottom of the flowers before sliding each one into the glass bottleneck. As she sat the vase onto the countertop, it rattled briefly. Laney’s eyes shot up at him. “Sorry, I’m a little . . . I don’t know. Nervous, I guess.” She held her hands at her waist, her fingers interlocked as she twisted them around one another.

Somehow, seeing that she was just as worried as he was, quelled the fear that had risen in his chest the moment he’d pulled into her driveway. He set his keys beside the vase and walked across the kitchen toward her. Without saying a word, he took her hand, gently pulling it away from the other, and tugged her toward him.

She molded against him, her head tucked perfectly at his collarbone and her arms around his neck. They breathed as one, her chest rising as his fell, and she pressed against him. The last remnants of trepidation fell away like leaves from an autumn tree, and Tommy couldn’t fathom why he’d been so nervous to begin with. This is exactly where he belonged, with her arms wrapped around him and her coconut-scented hair tickling his nose.

After a moment, Laney took a deep breath, and her exhale blew across the hollow of his neck. “I missed you,” she said, and her lips faintly brushing against his throat stirred up an

entirely different feeling, one starting down low, just beneath his belly button, and sinking lower by the second. He allowed himself another breath to enjoy this moment, of her wrapped around him so perfectly, just as she'd done for three years, before he pressed his lips to her temple and stepped back.

“I missed you, too.”

They ate spaghetti on the mismatched dinner plates they'd collected over the years—Tommy on the lemon dish with the tiny chip on one side and Laney on the last plate left of a crackled teal set her mother gave them when they moved in together. Tommy had tried, on more than one occasion to buy a nice matching set, but Laney maintained that she liked the quirky vibes that mismatched dinnerware gave off.

“So, how have you been feeling?” he asked, and she furrowed her brow questioningly as she finished her last bite of garlic bread. “With the baby and all? Have you had, I don't know, morning sickness, or . . .” He finished that eloquent sentence with an equally eloquent wave of his hand toward her stomach, hidden from view beneath the kitchen table.

Laney attempted to swallow through her laugh and had to cover a cough with her napkin. “You're adorable.”

Tommy pushed his plate away from him and chuckled too. “Look, I know nothing about babies.”

Laney tossed her napkin onto her plate and took a sip of her water. “I don't know much more. I was only fifteen when my sister had Hayley, and they moved to Florida right after. I missed all of that with her and Bodhi both.” Shrugging, she gave him the hint of a smile. “We'll figure it out. Besides, my sister is about as sharp as Jello; if she can do it, I'm sure we can.”

Tommy had only met Laney's older sister twice. She and her husband lived in Clearwater, and they didn't visit often. It had always been strange to Tommy how they didn't *need* one another. It was the same with their brother, Robert. He was two years older than Laney and owned a bed and breakfast somewhere in Idaho. In the four years that Tommy had known Laney, Robert had only visited a handful of times. And yet, despite the lack of physical closeness, they all spoke regularly on the phone, and Laney maintained that their relationships were as strong as ever.

Tommy asked Laney once if there had ever been a falling out or something that made them all want to be on opposite sides of the country from one another, and she'd looked at him funny, as if his question made no sense at all. She'd said, "No, that's what you're supposed to do. You go out and make a life of your own, right? I mean, I only stayed here because I love it not because I feel like I owe it to my mama to be nearby." As the music director of Lakeview Reformed Baptist, Mrs. Statler too had a full-time schedule of her own, and she taught piano lessons to a half dozen homeschool families in the community. She didn't seem to be lacking at all without her children in close proximity. But the idea was completely foreign to Tommy; he'd never considered that the benchmark for a stable family meant that they were all capable of caring for themselves.

"But it was absolute hell for the first trimester," Laney continued. "If not for Mrs. Baker bringing over soup every other day, I don't think I would've been able to eat at all. Just being in the restaurant every night made me nauseous." She scooted her chair back enough to lay a hand affectionately over her stomach. "You're lucky you missed the worst of it. It was like *The Exorcist* in here every time I—"

She'd looked up and caught the expression on his face that he hadn't been quick enough to stop. "Oh, Tommy, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

He forced a smile. "I know." He'd been sitting in the county jail and then Creekside while Laney was out here dealing with the struggles and anxiety of being pregnant all by herself. Well, not by herself exactly; Mrs. Baker had been here to help. It was no wonder the woman hated him. He'd abandoned Laney when she needed him most, and not only that but he'd traumatized her in the process. She could barely even eat, and Tommy had been discussing his *feelings* and how hard his own life had been with Dr. Parsons. An irrational burn of anger shot through him at the man, even though if anyone was to blame for the predicament he'd gotten himself—and, subsequently, Laney—into, it certainly wasn't the psychiatrist who'd done nothing but help him since it all began.

She touched his hand, and he looked up, meeting her gaze. Laney's lips twisted to one side like she needed to work up the nerve to ask a question she'd had on her mind for some time. "What was it like in there?"

Tommy shrugged and flipped his hand over to lace his fingers through hers. "Not as bad as puking rallies, I'm sure."

Laney tilted her head to one side and gave him the look he'd always called her *mother look*, the one that said she was not at all impressed with his antics, or, in this case, deflection.

"It really wasn't bad. Outside of smelling like piss occasionally, it was fine." He sat up and rested his elbows on the table.

"So, not like a horror movie, then?" Laney smirked, but her eyes said she wasn't kidding.

“No,” Tommy said with a laugh. “The lights all worked, so none of that flickering business you see in the movies, and I’m pretty sure none of the doctors were killing people after lights out.”

Laney continued to stare at him, reminded Tommy of Dr. Parsons and the way he could stare right into his soul and pry the words right out of him. “Most of the people in there weren’t *crazy*, not like you see on TV. They were there because they tried to kill themselves or were depressed or something. Only a few seemed to have serious issues.” His thoughts returned to Warren, his lips barely moving as he spoke to himself and the wall he never seemed to look away from.

“Were you scared?”

Tommy looked down at his fingernails, unsure of how truthful to be. She’d clearly worried for him, and a part of him wanted to put her mind at ease, to show her that everything had been fine, but then he could hear Dr. Parsons in his mind, saying, “*I thought we agreed to be honest.*”

There had been nights, especially at first, when he’d expected to be scared, alone in the dark in a place made for the mad, but for the most part, it wasn’t much different from his jail cell. Granted, the food and bedding was substantially better and his door wasn’t locked on the outside, but it was always partially lit and noisy throughout the night—squeaking shoes across linoleum and murmuring voices. But, on some nights, there were shouts from the other patients, and once, from the staff, after Claudia Bennett, a woman somewhere in her fifties, had overdosed on the medication she’d been checking for days. But even then, he hadn’t been scared really. At that point, the first medication Dr. Parsons had given him, he hadn’t felt much of anything at all. In fact, that instance is what had made the doctor switch him to a different one to begin with. He’d

stood there, watching from his doorway as Claudia, a woman he'd had lunch with for days on end, who'd blankly shared her own story in group sessions, was loaded onto a stretcher and the black body bag zipped over her face, and felt nothing.

The only person who'd actually given him the willies was an elderly woman named Pauline. Her hair, likely blonde at one time, was the color of yellow-tinted dishwater and fell down in oily strings past her waist. She walked the halls from sun-up to sun-down, her eyes focused on her bare feet and the three middle fingers on one hand trailed along the wall as she strolled. There was something about the shuffling of her feet or the way he could never quite see her eyes that made him feel trapped. That same irrational dry-mouth fear that he'd felt in the closet growing up, helpless to whatever was happening on the other side of the door, rose in his chest whenever he was around Pauline, and he couldn't put his finger on exactly why.

Once, Tommy passed her, and just like on every other occasion, he crossed to the other side of the hallway to avoid her. Just as she left his periphery and he started to breathe again, a claw-like hand wrapped around his arm and turned him toward her. He'd been so taken aback by the force of her grip and the wide whites of her eyes that he couldn't move. Spit flew from her lips and peppered his face as she said, "He's got you."

He'd broken into a sweat and tried to quell the senseless fear that caught in his throat. "What?" The moment his hand brushed hers, as he tried to push her hand from his wrist, she'd snapped.

Her hair fell in front of her face as she screamed, leaping back from him as if his touch had burned her. She rushed away, her back to the wall, and continued to wail until her voice cracked. Tommy had tried to help her, to brush her arm and calm her, but the more he tried to help, the harder she pressed against the wall, her eyes almost bulging from her face in terror. By

the time staff arrived, she'd collapsed to the floor, kicking and flailing to get further away from him as Tommy stood, flabbergasted with his arms raised so the situation couldn't at all be misconstrued. After that, any time they entered the same hallway, she'd turn and continue her strolling in the other direction.

Realizing he still hadn't answered her question, Tommy said, "Sometimes. Really it was more humiliating than anything."

"Humiliating?"

His whole body felt warm at the memory, but he couldn't shy away from it. He'd kept enough secrets from Laney as it was, and telling her the truth was the first step in showing her that he wasn't that man anymore.

He swallowed unable to look at her as he spoke. "When you go to jail after trying to kill yourself, they take everything from you, even your clothes. They put you in a cell by yourself and lock you in, without any bedding or even a toothbrush, and put you in this green Velcro . . . smock thing, so you can't hurt yourself."

"That's . . . barbaric." There it was again. Pity. Her eyebrows dipped on either side, and she took his hand again, and the warmth of her palms on his skin overpowered the memory of the how cold it had been in that cell wearing nothing but that god-awful plastic suit.

He shrugged. "I did it to myself, Laney—"

"It doesn't matter." This was one of the many things he loved about her, her righteous indignation on the behalf of someone she perceived to be wrong. Though, in this case, he certainly didn't deserve it. "That's . . . how is that supposed to help you?"

“Well, it keeps you alive, so there’s that.”

“I’m sure it’s more of a way for them to cover their ass than to actually help you.” Laney shook her head, her eyes ablaze. “That’s ridiculous, and—and cruel, and—”

“Effective.”

She cut her eyes at him, as if he wasn’t the one who’d experienced it.

“If nothing else, it made damn sure I’ll never go back there again.”

Laney shook her head again and stood to clear their plates from the table, but Tommy beat her to it. “I’ll do this, you go sit down.” Her face softened once again. “You cooked, let me at least do this much.”

As Tommy washed the few dishes in the sink, Laney walked out onto the front porch. With the soft, familiar whine of the swing as she swayed back and forth, Tommy also heard the sound of her sniffing. He dried the dishes with shaking hands and stacked them back into the cabinets where they belonged. He thought he’d felt so drained after talking to Dr. Parsons maybe because, even though the man had been instrumental in helping him overcome his demons, both figurately and literally, he wasn’t exactly a friend or someone he loved. But telling Laney would be different. Not just because the doctor told him should, but also because he wanted to free himself of it. If he said the words out loud, to someone he loved, to someone who heard him because they loved him back not because it was their job, then he could move on from it. Just like Laney had told him the day before, they couldn’t just go on as if none of it ever happened, and to do that, he had to look the past head on.

As the screen door eased shut, Laney looked up from her hands to face him, and even in the pale light of the moon, he could see the puffy, redness around her eyes. He sat on the swing beside her and draped his arm around her shoulders the same way he had a thousand times.

Laney leaned into him and sniffed again, wiping at her eyes with the tissue she'd balled up in her palms.

"Sorry, I just—"

"Don't apologize."

"No, *you* had to go through that, and now you have to comfort me like it was me instead.

That's dumb, and—"

He squeezed her shoulder, and she gave a watery sigh.

"I just hate to think of you in there, miserable and alone and . . . Maybe if I hadn't—"

"Don't do that," Tommy said. "Please. I'm so sorry that"—her gaze snapped up to meet his—"I just mean I would've died if not for you. This is on me. All of it. Not you. You're the greatest thing that's ever happened to me, that night and every night before or since then, and I don't want you to ever feel anything less than that."

They were silent for a moment, with only the sound of the crickets in the field beside them, the vibrating hum of frogs from Mr. McGregor's pond, and the creak of the swing's metal chains in the night air. Tommy rubbed the pad of his thumb in soft circles across her arm as she laid her head onto his shoulder. His free hand was in hers, and she traced the line around his fingers with her own, dipping in between his knuckles, a habit she'd always had.

"I had my first AA meeting last night."

Her finger paused briefly before she continued her track up his pinky. "How was it?"

"Boring."

She laughed, and her chest pressed into his side. "I'd expect no less."

"And I saw my doctor today."

"How was that?"

Tommy thought for a moment. “It was good. We talked about you.”

“Did you tell him how amazing I am? Beautiful? Wonderful in every way?”

“Oh, he already knows all that.”

Laney poked him in the ribs with one finger, and Tommy laughed again, edging her away from him with his shoulder. When she tried to tickle him again, he took both of her hands in one of his and held her there until she stopped trying to tickle him.

“I told him you were pregnant.”

Laney tugged her hands out of his and bumped him with her shoulder. “Did he ask something stupid like if it was yours?”

He dropped his head against the back of the swing and groaned. “No, of course not.”

“It’s nice to know your doctor isn’t an idiot.”

“Unlike some people?”

“You said it, not me . . . I forgive you.” She leaned up a bit, planting a subtle kiss to the underside of his jaw. “But there’s a good chance I’ll never let you live it down.”

“I’d expect no less,” Tommy said, repeating her words back to her.

She laughed, and Tommy relished the sound, like tinkling bells; he preferred it over the sound of her crying any day. Placing a hand over her stomach, he vowed to himself that he’d never be the reason she cried again.

“I told him how scared I was. That I didn’t want to screw this up, screw *him* up, and he basically told me that everyone feels that way.”

“Tommy, *I* feel that way. I think it’s pretty normal. Like I said, we’ll figure it out together.”

The wind blew her hair across his cheek, and Laney reached up to pull it behind her ear again. He wanted to leave it at that, to just hold her and pretend that everything was back to the way it should be.

We can't just go on like it never happened.

“And we talked about my brother.”

Laney stopped her ministrations across his fingers, and Tommy realized how tense he'd become when she squeezed his forearm.

“Does this make you uncomfortable to talk about?”

“Extremely,” Tommy said, sagging beneath the weight of the word and heaviness of memories on his chest.

“Then why are you? Why are you telling me all this?”

Tommy took a deep breath, using every ounce of will power he had to keep his words even. He turned her toward him. “Because I don't want to keep anything from you. I want you to know that I'm doing everything in my power to fix this, to fix *me*. I don't want you to worry about me being okay for you or for our son or any of that. I need you to know that it's never going to happen again. So if that means I need to be uncomfortable so that you know everything about me and my screwed up family, then . . . I'm just going to have to be uncomfortable.”

She touched his cheek, her eyes searching his face for a moment before she nodded.

“Okay. Tell me everything.”

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Black Swan. Directed by Darren Aronofsky, performances by Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, Twentieth Century Fox, 2010.

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