

Teace Snyder

REVERIE

Reverie is Teace Snyder's fifth novel but his first publication. He operates, and can be contacted through, his website www.teace.ca, which he created and launched in 2007. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where he grew up and continues to grow... arguably.

Also by Teace Snyder,

www.teace.ca

REVERIE

a novel

Teace Snyder

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REVERIE

CHAPTER 1

“I love you, Megan.”

“Lana. My name’s Lana,” she growled, giving out an exasperated hiss that stung my ears through the receiver.

“I’m sorry... I’m just over worked,” I explained, staring guiltily at my empty in-bin.

“No you’re not, Josh,” she stated, letting white noise take the mike. Ten-Mississippi. “I don’t know who she is, but I pray to shit you can at least get her name right.”

“Meg—Lana... there isn’t anyone else, I promise you that.”

“That promise is a lie you can keep.”

She hung up before I could speak, before I could explain. The heartbeat of the now vacant line echoed through my cubicle. Beep... beep... beep... Fuck. My mouth was open—cow-caught-in-the-headlights style. I put the phone down and realized I was out. I didn’t see it coming. Somehow I was under the distinct impression that we were happy. What does that say about me?

“Mrs. Larrenberg?” I heard a man say in a crisp anal-retentive tone. I stopped to turn until I’d turned enough to stop. Uncle Sam was at my doorstep. Two of him, to be exact. Right side: buzz cut, full-out uniform, flag-bearing, all-American. Wrong side: same as the right.

“Nnnno,” I replied, squinting to try and deter the intense gaze of GI Joe.

“Ma’am, we regret to inform you that your husband colonel, Maxwell Larrenberg was killed last night defending his country.”

“That’s terrible. Oh, wait. I’m not married... and I’m a man.”

“He fought very bravely. We present you with this flag in his honor,” Right Side stated as Wrong Side approached my desk to lay a freshly ironed American flag upon my keyboard.

“Guys, I don’t want to have to call security. Mainly because I’ve never done it before and I don’t care to learn how.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Right Side said comfortingly, before he and his companion marched out of sight.

I turned to look at the silky flag gracing my office with a variance of color beyond the customary green post-its. I frowned, letting feeling show—rare for me, since I was reared under the emotional devastation act of piss-poor parenting. I wheeled my chair inch-by-inch towards the opening in my cubicle so I could see down the man-made hallway of my co-workers and catch a final glimpse of the army putting tax dollars to good use. But they were gone and, as I swiveled back to face my desk once more, so was the flag.

CHAPTER 2

“I remember being born,” I confessed, gazing into the bland tiles of a tanned ceiling. The leather upholstery of the couch I lay upon creaked and moaned. The ticking of an antique grandfather clock reminded me that I was on the meter and that no revelation or sanctuary was free.

“That’s highly unlikely, Josh... perhaps it was a dream, or maybe you’ve confused one memory for another,” my shrink told me, agreeable and sympathetic only so far as to get paid.

“No, this is the real deal,” I muttered, tucking my elbows to my sides so that I could rest my hands upon my chest. “It was black at first. Quiet. I don’t know how I was feeling, or anything,” I stated, preempting her incessant questioning of how I felt. “Then, I remember... opening my eyes... and hearing... a heartbeat.”

“Whose heart beat?”

“I don’t know... my mother’s... the doctor’s, maybe. But it was loud. Like the exaggerated pitch you get from one of those machines that registers the beat as a series of spikes, you know?” I explained, guiding my eyes along the lines of the room—one connecting to another.

“An ECG?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Then what happened?” she asked, feeding my time into her assertion that I liked to talk about myself.

“Everyone was staring at me and I didn’t know why,” I detailed, falling into memory enough to feel a whisper of emotion. “After the black faded, everything was white and there were lots of people in the room. Some were wearing hospital jackets, while others were strapped into beds with tubes running in and out of them. There were large, complex machines all around and I remember... I tried to move, but they held me down. They stuck a needle in me and... nothing... that’s all I remember,” I groaned, rubbing my eyes, as a residual headache crept into my skull.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you, Josh,” she said as encouragingly as she could fake. Clearly, my earliest memories weren’t interesting enough for her. Shrinks are like magic eight balls; only they’re the ones asking the questions.

“What’s really bothering me, huh? What’s really bothering me...” I repeated, using my rambling as a device to conjure up an answer. “I... fuck, I don’t know. Lana left me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy,” I mumbled, pausing, as it was the first time I’d truly admitted the breakup to anyone, including myself.

“Have you spoken to her about it?”

“I tried. But she’s pretty mad at me... she thinks I’m seeing another woman.”

“Why does she think that?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Pray tell.”

Sigh—not of relief. Putting it into words meant a concrete understanding of what happened and how I felt. Not bloody likely. I had my thick crust of denial oozing contempt, gushing regret. Or, at least, that’s how I

thought of it... unfortunately, the capacity to feel was beyond me. But somehow I knew I'd loved Lana—her smell, her smile. And now my prick of a therapist was prodding me with her over-inflated ego to try and scare up some answers. Shoot the messenger, return to sender.

“The court didn’t assign me to you to solve my marital problems,” I snapped, coughing to clear any sign of irreverence from my tone. She adjusted herself in her seat—uncomfortable with either what I’d said, or what she’d have to say. We were both acting here.

“I know perfectly well why you were assigned to me. Just as you know the consequences of failing to cooperate,” she stated firmly. She didn’t like me—at all. I leaned my head back to see her sitting down, standing her ground. I smiled. Mental reminder: two more months with this bitch, and you’re free.

“Fine,” I exclaimed. “But like I said, it’s complicated; so if you keep butting in with that ‘how do you feel’ crap it’ll take forever.”

“Watch it, Josh.”

“The obvious answer is that, on more than one occasion, at less than ideal times, I’ve called her Megan.”

“Who’s Megan?”

“I don’t know. The only Megan I’ve ever met choked to death half-way through a pie-eating contest,” I explained, sinking deep into memory to try and unearth an epiphany. “But that’s not why she left me...” I realized, the fluidity of my thoughts becoming apparent as I vomited them out.

“Then why did she leave you?”

“I don’t know... I’ll have to ask her,” I sighed, sitting up as the clock chimed-in to set me free. “Not that I wouldn’t love to stay and chat, but I’ve got misery to tend to,” I said sarcastically, sliding on my coat.

She uncrossed her legs and stood up to show me to the door. She wore an old grey suit that might have looked nice to anyone with taste. I watched her unflinching determination to be as professional as she could, while dealing with someone as utterly intolerable as myself. But I liked to think she was capable of recognizing that my distaste for her wasn't personal, it was circumstantial. That, under my petulant remarks, there was some degree of favor. Who knows? Had we met any other way, and been completely different people, it might have been true.

CHAPTER 3

Exit cab. Dispense fair (including inadequate tip) and turn to face home.

The wind blew a wet newspaper onto my face. It was fall. The air was filled with the damp smell of rotting leaves. The trees watched as flickers of red, orange, yellow, and a fishbowl crashed to the ground... What the?... I flinched and looked at my feet. Shards of glass and muddy water surrounded a flailing fish, fighting for breath. I glanced up to my apartment window and saw Lana's orange dog-of-a-cat perched on the ledge, peering down at me. He wagged his tail and turned his back out of frustration for having just missed me. If he was there, she was there.

There's no way she'd forgive me, let alone plan to apologize to me; which meant she had come for her things. I stood still, contemplating an appropriate counter-measure. I needed to barge in, that's a given. Act... distraught and... angry that she'd do this. But still be understanding, for God's sake—I don't actually want to lose her. I have to play it right. Ask questions and ignore her criticisms. She'll want to see me suffer. It's not enough for me to feel like shit, I'd have to cry to convince her.

Open door and step inside. Take note of open mail cage. Ascend steps.

Deep breath. Pro: relaxing; con: the hallway smelt of shit. First, she'd stonewall me, then she'd snap at me. There'll be a brief period where I walk around observing the things she's packed and... fuck that—I know the stuff she'll claim, and there's no god damn way she's getting away with it. Contingency plan: smuggle all Lana's ill-claimed items back into the apartment; keeping in mind that if she does forgive me, this will likely make her hate me again... Back to sequential conjecture. Silence, snapping, anger, tears (reciprocation?), fury, exit. If she stays mad this'll go quickly. If I could get her to calm down and talk to me, it'll take forever. Best-case scenario: she'll try to kill me, fail, and realize she loves me during my recovery.

Grasp handle and turn. Push door inward. Swallow own tongue.

“Lana?” I cried, removing my coat and throwing it atop one of her suitcases. The rustling in the living room momentarily stopped, and I walked cautiously in. She made a point of avoiding eye contact, quickly throwing things together that she'd need. Bob, her cat, hissed at me. “Lana, I'm sorry,” I stated, leaning against the doorframe. She ignored me. “I'm not seeing another woman,” I assured her, struggling with my facial expression as I'd never been any good at conveying, feeling, or understanding emotions.

“I don't care if you're seeing another woman,” she muttered, slamming an ashtray into an oversized wicker handbag.

“Clearly.”

“Is that why you think I'm leaving?” she demanded, shooting a glare in my direction for dramatic effect. I wished I had an expression to match her intensity.

“Yes,” I lied, knowing only that there was more, but still ignorant as to what.

“Get a clue, Josh,” she snapped, stomping into the other room. I looked down at the things she’d been packing and shuddered. Just as I suspected: she was making a run for the splendors. I crept forward, sure to be as quick and quiet as possible. I switched the records she’d packed, the wedding gifts she’d assumed her own, along with just about everything she’d ever purchased for me that she now felt compelled to deprive me of. Then, with only a moment left before she returned, I grabbed a framed wedding picture from the banister and pushed it into one of her bags along with a few handfuls of oranges. This way, if I failed in my attempts to reconcile things, she’d see the picture and remember better times. The oranges would counterbalance the weight of the stuff I’d removed from her bags.

“Can we talk about it?” I asked, doing my best to simulate a fragile tone as I returned to lean on the door frame.

“You don’t have to fake emotions with me, Josh—I know you don’t have any!” she yelled, a crash and thud following her words. She emerged a moment later with a rack of clothes piled on her shoulder.

“I do too,” I exclaimed, missing my goal of hurt, and hitting prepubescent anxiety instead. She looked at me as though she were going to continue the offense, but just shrugged it off and went back to packing. It wasn’t that I didn’t have emotions... I just... didn’t feel them. I missed the memo. “Why are you leaving, Lana?” I asked, sliding my hands in my pockets so she wouldn’t see me twitch.

“The question is, why should I stay?”

“Because I love you,” I replied, genuine feeling taking the helm. It felt foreign, contrived; real nonetheless. The only time I was ever sure of myself was when I said I loved her.

“It’s not enough... and now I know how naïve I’ve been to think it could be,” she explained, not really explaining anything. “I think that there may

have been a chance to work things out between us, but not anymore... I hate you for making this happen, for making me leave.”

“I understand where you got confused. By my saying ‘stay,’ you obviously interpreted it as leave,” I joked in a half-perplexed, quarter-worried, totally desperate way.

“Fuck you. Don’t hide behind jokes,” she growled, pausing her departure to address my opaque cowardice, labeled ‘humor.’

“What do you want me to say?” I whispered, looking at the ground. This wasn’t going the way it was supposed to. She had an agenda to leave and wasn’t slowing down. She was mad, hurt, distraught—but rational, all the same. This was premeditated. This was long overdue. This was certain.

Don’t move. Don’t breath. Panic.

“We want the same thing. For you to be quiet and listen,” she said, striding gradually towards me without an ounce of compassion. “I have stuck by you through some of the worst years of your life. I have been there both emotionally and financially. I’ve put up with your inability to socialize, communicate, or even understand the most basic of my needs. But I can’t any longer,” she stated, standing but a few inches from me. My eyes darted back and forth between hers, trying to understand. Something had changed and I wondered if this was the woman I loved.

“I’ve been there for you too, Lana,” I said, my mind adrift in a sea of worry. Her eyes were different; they had morphed from blue, caring, and hopeful to a devastated, lifeless, hazel. For me eyes had never been the window to the soul—they were but a familiar focal point... I didn’t recognize her.

“No, you haven’t been there... you’re somewhere else,” she sighed, looking down. She moved past me and continued collecting items. I stood still, reflecting on what it would be to lose her. My hands shook in my pockets and my heart pounded. I was afraid—of that I was sure.

Lana went about her business, gathering things with such precision that I assumed she’d practiced. I watched her move without remorse or regret. How could I not have seen this? She was miserable—enough so that when it finally came to leaving, she seemed to feel nothing but relief. However, it was new to me and I couldn’t easily understand, let alone accept, it. I made my way into the kitchen and pulled out a bag of onions. I placed one on a cutting board and began dicing it as quickly as I could. Then, when I had sufficiently butchered it, I leaned in and inhaled. Tears were forced into my eyes and I could finally face Lana convincingly. I pushed the evidence into the garbage can and made my way to the office. Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall...

“Lana please—just give me another chance,” I whimpered, knowing that my onion-induced-tears would fade quickly and I had to make this count. She looked up at me and paused. For the first time since I’d arrived I saw how much this was hurting her. She knew my tears were fake, but understood my simulated feeling was real.

“Nice try, Josh—But I can’t. Ever since the accident you’ve changed,” she said, walking up to me to give me a kiss on the cheek. “Goodbye,” she whispered, leaving the office and gathering together the bags of things she’d need to never see me again. Bob pranced gingerly behind her, giving me a birds-eye view of his buttocks. He meowed once, and they were gone.

Collapse. Feel a familiar void within yourself. Remember what you’re supposed to forget...

CHAPTER 4

“Ever since the accident... ever since the accident... ever since the accident,” I repeated, slouched over on my couch watching cartoons on mute. I flipped channels like a monkey at a typewriter—no direction, but repetition. I daydreamed of Lana’s tear-filled attempts to get me back, following her revelation that she had been wrong... that she still loved me and had been a fool to think otherwise... It was a week since Lana left me, and I was running out of sick days. But I was bothered less by her absence than I was by the reminder of what I’d done. I was consumed by a depth of emotion foreign to me; a sorrowful remorse, regret, requiem. The little girl’s face burned my conscience... Annie.

CHAPTER 2

“I can’t believe we actually have a white picket fence,” I laughed, dropping a box labeled ‘delicate’ onto our new porch. A couple of legs twitched from underneath the cardboard and eventually grew still. I lifted the corner to see that I’d unintentionally crushed a grasshopper. “The ant wins again,” I muttered, thinking myself quite clever.

“Love that butt... too bad it’s so lazy,” my wife exclaimed, pinching my side and pushing past me. She glanced playfully back as she stepped through the door of our new home for the first time. Her shoulder-length, black hair brushed against the doorframe and I recalled bumping her head in an attempt to carry her on our honeymoon. After 10 years she hadn’t lost an ounce of beauty. Her long, slender shape was draped with a white blouse and faded jeans that sweltered with domestic fever. Ironic, then, that she was the career woman and I the stay-at-home dad.

I heaved the box back onto my shoulder and stomped inside. The empty space made the place look bigger than it was. It had been some time since I lived in a house. Megan planted the box she had been carrying onto the kitchen counter, and turned to embrace me. We wrapped our hands around each other’s hips. She smiled at me, and I at her. We heard a few thumps from upstairs and briefly contemplated breaking the moment to check on our daughter, Annie. But moments to stand alone and say nothing were too rare to pass one up now.

“Don’t give me that look,” Megan, my wife, grumbled playfully. She lowered her brows and squinted, searching my face for desire.

“What look?”

“You know perfectly well ‘what look,’” she stated, leaving me with a confused expression pasted over my well-masked intention.

“Uh...”

“The ‘I love you, let’s fuck’ look,” she laughed, lowering her voice when she said ‘fuck’ just in case Annie was listening.

“What better way to christen the new house?” I joked, rubbing her hips while swaying lightly back and forth.

“Maybe later,” she said, looking away from me uncomfortably as I had misused the term ‘christened.’ Megan, as much as I loved her, was a strong-minded Christian and I was strictly agnostic. There was a mutual respect—and concurrent resentment—for the strength it took to tolerate one another’s differences of faith. The kind of substantial discrepancies you’d overlook for love, but could feel eating away at the relationship all the same. I cleared my throat and released her from my hold as Annie came running down the stairs.

“What’s up munchkin?” I asked, rubbing her head as she ran past me towards the fridge. She looked like her mother—dark hair, thin, and tall. Megan had taught her to braid her hair the week before the move and, ever since, Annie had some woven-lock sticking out. Her favorite seashell necklace dangled over her white v-neck t-shirt dotted with cartoon cats, while the pink cords she wore made my eyebrow twitch. My wife liked to take her to ‘Gap Kids,’ but I always protested. The notion of classism in a four-year-old made me cringe.

“I’m hungry,” she replied, realizing that new houses didn’t come with stocked refrigerators.

“Hungry, huh? What do you feel like having?” I asked, drifting away from Megan to tend to Annie.

“Pizza!” she chirped, hopping with glee.

“Alright, but there has to be a vegetable. What’s it gonna be?” I asked, leaning down and tapping her on the tip of her nose.

“Um... potatoes!”

“Yeah, I don’t think they’ll put that on pizza, hun. How ‘bout mushrooms?”

“Fine,” she groaned, sliding her socked feet on the linoleum and looking up at the ceiling as she walked back up to her new room. I made my way over to one of many boxes and opened it, removing a phone book. Megan watched, waiting for me to look at her so she could speak.

“Do you think she’s avoiding me?” she asked, once she was convinced Annie couldn’t hear.

“No. Why do you ask that?” I replied, flipping through the phone book to track down a nearby pizza place.

“Because, whenever I’m around, she always retreats to her room,” Megan stated, quickly glancing to and away from me. I knew her well enough to know that there was truth to what she said; but I also knew that she was saying it so I’d contradict her. I locked eyes with her and mustered a smile.

“I don’t think it’s you. She’s just keeping herself busy. Annie doesn’t have many friends. But that’ll change now that we’re settled,” I said reassuringly, finding no comfort in lying to my wife in order to escape an argument. The truth was that Annie did avoid her. That the questions of ‘where’s mommy?’ had ended long ago. And that Megan

had grown so detached that she felt me obligated to bring Annie around for her. We each had our roles—we were both acting here.

CHAPTER 3

“Ten Mississippi!” Annie hollered, letting me know that I only had a few seconds longer to find a good hiding place. I moped around a corner and saw a nook obvious enough to be discrete. Lowering myself into it, I pulled a few unpacked boxes in front of me and sat silently. Hide-and-seek was the only game my temperament would allow. When Annie heard Megan and me yelling, she came to investigate and the argument was cut short. “Ready or not, here I come!” she cried, hurried footsteps following her bellow.

Love had changed me in such a profound way as to mask the transformation and disavow what was before it. I recalled looking blindly into the future—naïve, ignorant. Seeing bliss—seeing only what I wanted to. But even hindsight is biased. I am a fool, but I am not foolish. To say that Megan and I were never in love or never had a chance would be jaded. What was once a youthful ardor, infatuation, and benevolent affection had transmogrified unto a humble reverence devoid of any passion, save for that I felt as a father. Tonight was the first time I questioned my love for Megan—knowing well that, in doing so, I was merely following suit... I hated myself, for now, having come to accept these thoughts, I would be subject to them—restless, tortured, broken. I had the life I had always wanted; only I didn’t want it anymore.

Her drooping eyes implied, if not conveyed, our dissolving love. Such had been my reward for encouraging Megan’s expression of how

she felt. The problem wasn't that we'd fought, as, that was what we had needed for so long. Rather, it was the feel of the dispute. One overshadowed not by a brooding spiteful regard of our nuptial fate, but the lack thereof... apathy was the extent of our affection. A distinct void between us had grown. Only Annie remained.

And yet, I loved Megan. It hurt me to think otherwise. Her beauty, her charm; the indescribable connection I felt for the mother of my child. I was consumed by an acidic compulsion to tear away both my feelings of unrest and contentment to find something new. It was selfish. It was rash. But the time I spent, fantasized, and cherished behind those boxes was the closest I'd get. My thoughts entertained my desires—becoming a reality unto themselves.

“Found you!” Annie squealed, poking her head over the tops of the boxes. I smiled and rose slowly, placing my hand on her shoulder.

“It's bed time,” I said, walking her to her room.

“Can I have a story, Dad?”

“Sure,” I exclaimed, focusing on Annie to get my mind off Megan. “Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall...”

CHAPTER 5

I leaned out the corner window of the connect-four cubicle spread, and placed a ‘Reserved’ sign on the ledge. I watched it sway in the wind, yet remain sturdy from the weights I’d constructed for its base. Morbid humor was my only chance of smiling. Time hadn’t lessened the pain—I’d merely grown accustomed to it. I was numb... Why the fuck did she throw a fishbowl out the window? We didn’t even own a fish... I’d moved down the emotional-void hierarchy all the way to apathy... insanity wasn’t far behind.

“Hey... I was so sorry to hear about your wife,” a familiar face, the person to which it belonged I knew nothing about, whispered as though it were a secret and everybody in the office hadn’t been laughing at me.

“I can’t imagine why you would be... but thanks for the thought,” I muttered, smelling burnt rubber. I could feel a tear pace down my cheek but when I raised my hand to wipe it away it had passed.

“Mr. Larrenberg? I’m doctor Maerd,” I heard someone say. I turned to face the face and saw the same slack jawed jackass hanging off my cubicle preaching sympathy.

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘if you need anything, don’t be afraid to ask,’” he repeated, expecting a greater attention span from a ruined man. I didn’t reply—watching him squirm was the only entertainment I cared for. “Well I’ll... I’ll catch you later,” he stuttered, taking my malapropos grin as his cue to exit. I shouldn’t

have come into work. I was in too much pain... or something like it. My head hurt. My body ached. And, for whatever reason, I had the compulsion to see my therapist. I groaned and looked at my phone, resentfully. She'd just fucking love it if I called her.

I tapped my fingers on my desk. This was a battle. If I could think of some reason to be calling, that didn't make it seem as if I needed to, I'd be in the clear. I had plenty of medication and she knew it. Besides, if I snuck in a conversation after getting a new prescription, she'd know I was up to something. No... I had to be in sync with how poorly I usually treated her. A complete disregard for everything she stood for. I'm not feeling well? I'm regressing back to a fetus? A schedule conflict?... B-I-N-G-O. The good-in-bad was that the tones made when I dialed her number sounded exactly like the first seven notes from "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple.

Ring. Ring. "Pick up the fucking phone, I know you're th..." I said, her answer and subsequent 'hello?' cutting me off mid-sentence. "What's up, doc?"

"What can I do for you, Josh?" she inquired, her tone dropping slightly once she realized who had called her. I adjusted the phone in my hand and my ass in the chair. I cleared my throat... nonchalant.

"Yeah, I'm not gonna be able to make it for our usual time, so I was wondering if we could reschedule," I explained, talking a little too quickly. She'd think I was nervous.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Um... if you have any time today that'd be fine... but if not tomorrow's ok," I said, talking a little too slowly. She'd think I was covering for how nervous she thought I was.

"I suppose I could squeeze you in later on in the day... how's four o'clock?" she asked, paper flipping in the background. I paused and moved the

receiver away from my mouth so she'd think I was checking my schedule. "It's uh... sure. Four sounds good."

"I'll see you then," she stated, hanging up before I could get the last word in. I leaned back in my chair and frowned. She'd think I needed her. Truth—I needed someone.

Immediately following the conclusion of our conversation I prepared to leave my desk. I wasn't able to do any work as it was, and I didn't have anything better to do than arbitrarily occupy my therapist's waiting room. She wouldn't mind, though; she likely wouldn't even notice. If the secretary asked, I'd just feed her some bullshit about 'getting work done on the go.' Fortunately, sitting for long periods of time with nothing to do was a strong point of mine.

I arrived more than a few hours early and took a seat by a stack of magazines. The clock lingered silently above me, providing me a countdown. And as I lifted a generic teen magazine to read, and subsequently waste away my day, the clock itself seemed a better thing to entertain me.

Several hours later I drifted back to reality following an intricate fantasy about Lana professing her undying love... I'm pathetic... I hadn't seen more than three people in the waiting room at one time; yet there were chairs enough for fifteen. Would they even notice if I took one? I don't want one. But I would like to know if they'd notice. I gave an evil eye to the quintessential receptionist, busy chatting online. I had to know.

Fwoomp—smack—what the fuck?

I heard a giggle that made my head turn slowly towards the culprit: a Dennis-the-Menace little brat, clutching a straw in his hand, smiled at me innocently. His mother sat idly in her chair reading a generic interest magazine. I peed the spitball off my temple and flicked it away.

“Fuck you,” I stated, turning away from the kid thereafter. His mother raised her head slowly, no longer living vicariously through the celebrities in her magazine. She opened her mouth and made a disgusted face. But, just as she was going to speak, I heard my name called and retreated to the doc for sanctuary. I had a big, dumbshit, smile plastered on my face when I made eye contact with my therapist. She did not share such an expression.

“Hello, Josh, how are you?” she asked stoically, gesturing for me to take a seat. No pun intended.

“Fine,” I sighed, regretting the sigh.

“My apologies but I can only fit us in for half the usual time,” she informed me, pulling out my file and opening it up to where we’d left off. Lana.

“Does that mean I only have to take half my medication?”

“No,” she stated, looking into the depths of my folder’s contents—tangible mental decay. “So did you get a chance to speak with Lana?”

“No,” I stated, looking into the depths of my pocket’s contents. “Wait, what was the question?” I asked, snapping back to reality.

“Lana. Did you two discuss your separation?”

“Right... yes, we did,” I replied, quite content with my efforts to mask my need to talk about it.

“And what did that entail?”

I knew I’d come explicitly to talk about Lana. Nevertheless I felt hesitant and apprehensive about what doing so might unearth. I felt? It was happening again. The pills were supposed to beat the feeling out of me... keep me from relapsing into the emotional mess that I used to be. I wondered what it would be like to feel more than the whisper of despair. All I had now was recognition; that alone was enough to torment me. The past year had changed

me in such a profound way as to mask the transformation and disavow what was before it.

“Josh?”

“Love?” I mumbled, drifting into memory.

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing... She wasn’t happy and I should have seen it,” I answered sincerely, realizing that if I didn’t talk about the loss with someone, it would drive me mad. My therapist remained silent—either shocked by my genuine sentiment, or trying to imply that I should continue of my own accord, without her prompting. “I’m trying to make myself think it’s the pills you put me on. But, to be honest, they probably helped the situation... I can’t feel anymore... I know I should be devastated, but—knowing isn’t enough... you’re supposed to feel pain too.”

“I... I think you’re mistaken Josh. The medication I prescribed to you does not negatively affect your temperament or capacity to feel. Per contra, it encourages such responses... They were given in accordance with a progressive treatment known by you when we began therapy... So it comes as a surprise to me that you say ‘you cannot feel,’” she explained, a confused expression swallowing her face.

“Um...”

“I’ve never known you to be an emotional person, Josh. In fact, it was by your account that I came to such an understanding... not to mention your apathetic regard of the accident that resulted in your assignment here,” she stated, making me feel stupid. I am a fool, but I am not foolish.

“No. The accident was the worst day of my life,” I exclaimed, sitting up as a spike of pain echoed through my skull. “I remember being emotional, but at the same time I don’t feel as though I was... it’s a little confusing,” I tried to explain, cold sensations boiling my stomach.

“Are you feeling alright? You look pale.”

“I’m... fine,” I whispered, an unprovoked rush of devastation consuming me. I’d never felt like this before. “I just... haven’t been myself lately.”

CHAPTER 4

The two and a half feet between Megan and I—as we lay still, trying to sleep—spoke volumes on the marriage. Her back was to me. And though she hadn't moved for a long while, I knew her eyes were open, looking for me. The covers dipped between us, creating a cavernous divide rising unto our thoughts of one another—sleepless. She made a muffled attempt to exhale and my heart sank. She was crying, and had been for some time.

“I love you Megan,” I whispered, reaching out to her. She turned towards me, a tear catching a glimmer of light from the window. I pulled my thumb along her cheek, feeling the heat of her face—she had fought hard to keep her sorrow from me. But this was our fight.

“I love you, too,” she replied, giving me a relieved smile. But I took no relief in it. Her eyes still carried a burden. I had to know.

“When did saying that become routine?” I asked, doing my best to keep my eyes to hers. Her face cracked and she almost fell into what she felt. But she prided herself too much to permit such an emotional display.

“I don't know,” she mumbled, losing the strength to look upon me in finding it to speak. She seemed to retreat within herself—leaving me only a whisper of her despair.

“Megan... are you happy?” I questioned, feeling an obligation to console her despite my desire to address my own trepidations.

“I’m...” she said, pausing to reflect on the question beneath the everyday lies—pillars to the illusion of our marriage. “I’m content,” she finally answered, with a sincere tone and guilty expression.

“Content?”

“Yeah,” she breathed, her speech barely audible.

“Is that good enough?”

“We have a child,” she said, bringing her sight to rest on mine. Her hazel eyes widened and flared. The night made them dark, deep, apt. Annie... was she all that held us together? And if so, for how long? Our obligations to one another were beyond matters of the heart. But a marriage should be more than a vow to keep—even if upheld for the sake of a child.

“We can’t make this about Annie,” I replied, shaking my head against the pillow. Megan looked away and thought about what I had said. As we both inched towards revealing our feelings, it became apparent that the discussion we had practiced in our minds was a fantasy. In truth, neither one of us would have any answer beyond another question.

“I need to know how you feel,” Megan stated, fighting against herself as her eyes swelled with tears. “I need to know if you still...” she tried to say, losing her battle and breaking into brief sobs. She took a deep breath and wiped away fallen tears to regain her composure. “I feel like we’re strangers.”

I flipped onto my back, solemn, in disbelief that we had found ourselves in such a predicament. I was unsettled by the diplomacy with which we were addressing our marital troubles. Our passion for one

another had depleted to such an extent, that all we could muster was a lifeless argument... too bad. Picking a fight would have made it easy—people are always quick to speak their minds when aggravated. But ours was a tranquil exchange of long-dormant, overdue fears. I wanted to feel pain... a scorching ache of falling from love. But I didn't. She was right... we were strangers.

“I feel as though we've become different people over the years. But we haven't shared our changes with one another,” I explained, guiding my eyes along the shadows on the ceiling.

“Do you still love me?” Megan asked, rising slightly from the bed to try and draw my eyes to hers. I turned my head to the side so that I could face her—tracing my gaze down the paths of her tears.

“I don't know if love's the right word anymore,” I replied after a long silence. She swallowed hard and I could see her heart sink. And yet she remained stable—strong. In her eyes I saw she understood, as only someone who felt the same could. Even in growing apart, we had come to the same junction.

“So what do we do?” she inquired, following a long pause concerning how our concerns would feed one another's. She looked at me—hopeful that I'd know what to say.

“It's too soon for answers, Megan,” I stated, sitting up and reaching for the bedside lamp. “First we have to discuss things,” I explained, flicking the on switch. We both sat up and leaned on the pillows resting against the headboard. Down to business.

“You seemed to have your mind made up before,” she muttered, referring to our argument, earlier in the night. Megan's temperament had changed; I could see her desire to discuss our marital problems had been overly zealous. Knowing her, she would try to pick a fight to avoid

hearing the very real possibility that we might not love each other anymore.

“I’m sorry we fought, but if it gets us to talk about this, it was worth it,” I stated, trying to stay focused on the issue. I knew we shouldn’t be approaching our thoughts without mutual candor. Without it, any decision or declaration would be founded on secrets kept, truths hidden, and lies lived—we would accomplish nothing more than what we had for years before.

“Talk about what?” she grumbled, using her disgruntled tone to draw me into quick words and rash thoughts.

“How our marriage isn’t working,” I said, keeping my eyes on hers even as she looked away. My words had been too harsh. It wasn’t a discussion if I’d already made up my mind... and saying it out loud made me feel weak. Something I could see in Megan’s response as well. Her face curdled and she frowned—her tears taking on a different shape.

As I watched her, I tried to unravel how she felt—hoping to find a path to follow myself. But her reactions were too unpredictable to mimic. She appeared to drift from hurt to relieved; from angry to numb. It was almost as though she were searching within herself for the right response—one better than the lack there of. Perhaps she was looking to me for guidance, as I was to her... The thought of her seeing how detached and lethargic I’d become frightened me. But, in that, I could see hope yet—my feelings for her had not yet escaped me.

“I’m sorry,” I exclaimed quickly, having realized my error. “How our marriage is in trouble.”

She seemed relieved by my correction, but made sure to look away all the same. Suddenly I felt ashamed. I didn’t want to hurt her. Our marriage wasn’t dead; rather, it had evolved into something neither one

of us had anticipated or prepared for. And now we were at a loss—caught in the midst of it, seeing only the bad. I wanted things to be as they were—before we had Annie. Despite my difficulties with Megan, I knew that I loved her, and Annie, more than anything. But the relationships I had with each of them conflicted with one another. The issue, then, wasn't as simple as whether or not I loved my wife. It was whether or not I loved the mother of my child.

CHAPTER 6

“What the fuck is wrong with me? Am I PMSing or something? I mean, what the fuck?” I cried, feeling a surge of anger once more, only to lose it to indifference... Is this normal? Is this how feelings are supposed to be?

I sat on the waiting room chair I'd swiped from my therapist's office earlier that day. Unfortunately, it was the only thing I took away from my session. The apartment was empty and felt emptier still. Lana hadn't paid me any mind, or so much as called for her messages. What kind of person do you have to be to run away from a marriage without even considering your spouse's well being?

“That all depends on the person they're running away from,” I answered, having only myself to talk to now. “What did I do wrong?”

I ignored her. I took her for granted. I did just about everything wrong, and didn't even have the sense to know it.

When I'm alone I like to keep the lights off. Only an infomercial telling me, ‘I've never had pasta like this before!’ lit the room. The walls were smeared with an eerie blue light that made me think of Meg—Lana... Jesus... why was this a familiar feeling? And how come I couldn't hold on to it long enough to grasp an understanding?... Poof, it's gone. And I'm back to questioning myself.

“How do I get her back?” I demanded, becoming aware of my heartbeat... I don't get her back. I'll probably never see her again.

“Why do I feel like we were happy? Why is it that, only after I’ve lost her, I can see how much we had?”

Maybe you were happy, but she wasn’t. And you never had anything more than each other, keeping in mind, she didn’t want you.

“Oh god...” I wheezed, my heart collapsing in on itself—the scorching ache of the one you love falling from love. I had always longed to feel something. Now I screamed to be free of it... poof it’s gone.

Emotion came and went like the tide—leaving a foreign aftertaste home to a stranger’s palette... Just because thoughts are your own doesn’t mean you understand them... This definitely wasn’t normal. Maybe it was a coping mechanism, or a way to keep myself from getting hurt. Maybe I had a biological inability to live with emotions the way other people could. Or maybe I was crazy and this was just the beginning... I needed her back.

“I need a drink,” I muttered, lifting myself from the couch and drudging over to the liquor cabinet.

Warning: do not consume alcohol while on your medication.

I went through the bottles, selecting the ones resembling bullets. Vodka, scotch, whisky, rye—stick a needle in your eye. I hated the taste of alcohol. But this was the mold, and I was never one to break it. I unscrewed caps and whipped out pint glasses, filling them to the brim. I grabbed a handful of those little umbrellas and swords, throwing them down into my drinks. With any luck I’d get something lodged in my throat too... She’ll come crawling back for me—flowers in hand, festering with pent-up tears from the huge mistake she made in leaving me.

“She’ll come back,” I assured myself, looking down at a row of empty liquor bottles aligned with filled glasses. “This isn’t a suicide... it’s a cry for help,” I reassured myself, picking up the phone and dialing 911. “I’ll be ok and she’ll come back... everybody wins.”

CHAPTER 5

This is ridiculous, I thought to myself, as I watched Megan showboat for the therapist's favor. Her version of 'fixing things' was wooing the impartial party with charm. At this rate they'd end up saying our marital troubles were my fault; that Megan made a wonderful mother and I had no right to complain.

The leather upholstery of the chair Megan and I sat upon creaked and moaned. The ticking of an antique grandfather clock reminded me that we were on the meter. And yet she took every opportunity to inquire further about the therapist's personal life, trying to stave off revelation. She took sanctuary in small talk while I sat impatient and annoyed...

"Mr. Larrenberg?" the therapist exclaimed, becoming aware of the fact I hadn't been following the conversation.

"Yes?" I replied, sitting up straight.

"Tell me about your marriage," she said encouragingly.

"What about it?"

"Just, about it. Whatever comes to mind."

"Well," I sighed, trying to think of what she'd want to hear.
"We've been married for ten years now... we've had our daughter Annie

for a little over four of those. I'm a stay-at-home dad and Megan works fulltime... but I'm not really sure what you're looking for so..." I stated, getting the feeling that I wasn't doing things correctly.

"No, that's great," she said, scribbling something down in her notepad. She smiled at me and asked another question, but I tuned out as the focus went to Megan. My eyes drifted around the room, documenting things in the office. I didn't like what was happening. I felt uncomfortable and ill-received—frustrated. My breathing was uneasy as I eyed the door hungrily, thinking of what I really wanted to say...

"This was a mutual decision. We could either go to a therapist or a divorce lawyer because if we'd tried to live as we are now, we'd only be drawn into those options someday down the road. But we chose to work things out... My concern, though, is that it isn't worth working out. That we've become so detached and distant that the only hope we have as a couple is our daughter... and quite frankly, that bothers me," I explained, taking the reigns of the session by imagining my own.

"Doesn't your wife see how her neglect of the family and yourself cripples the marriage?" the therapist asked, playing into my bias quite well.

"She's selfish; career bound—she's narrowed her sights on the breadwinning label. So now as long as she brings in money she feels she's done her job," I replied, curt and concise within the fantasy.

"What about you? Do you resent your wife for experiencing things outside of the house? For having more to her life than the

obligation of a child?" the therapist demanded, morphing into a critical reflection of myself.

"I don't resent her for experiencing things. I just wish we could experience them together. But like I said—she makes money, I watch Annie; that's our life. And because we have such contrasting and well defined roles we've become strangers."

"Or maybe that's how you've rationalized it. I'd say because you're a stay at home parent you won't let Megan get close to Annie. Because that way you can hold your relationship with your daughter over your wife. And in doing so glorify yourself while diminishing her efforts," the therapist lectured, taking hold of a part of my mind I hadn't planned on indulging.

"No... my wife is negligent, self-centered and distant. It's because of that that my efforts to include her have failed."

"You're wrong. Whether you admit it or not, you are every bit as much to blame for the distance as she is... had you been more open to the restrictions of her schedule with respect to the life you carved for Annie and yourself, perhaps she'd be responsive. But as it is, you've found refuge in your love for your daughter, while your wife has retreated into her work to make herself feel worthwhile... you both resent and envy one another," she stated, leaving an echo in my head that reverberated unto my return to reality...

"Mr. Larrenberg? Are you feeling alright?" the real therapist asked.

“I’m... fine,” I whispered, an unprovoked rush of devastation consuming me. There would be no quick fixes here—it was a process. And I now understood what I had seen in my wife’s behavior earlier in the session—I no longer desired revelation, for fear of what it may bring. Megan and I knew each other’s faults well enough to see the implications of our own. But neither one of us had the strength to voice anything beyond censored versions of the true feelings these sessions would unearth...

“What are you afraid of?” Megan asked, as she and I were now alone in my mind. The scenery had changed with the therapist now gone. All that remained was us and our empty, new house.

“I’m afraid of our life staying the way it is. But more than that I’m afraid of things changing for the worse and Annie suffering the consequences,” I replied, leaning up against the imaginary wall.

“Is this where you saw us in ten years?” I wondered pulling out of fantasy long enough to look at my wife...

She sat still, listening intently to what the therapist had to say. Her profile was slender and beautiful. I’d always loved her long nose fitted with a delicate bump at the tip. Her eyebrows lifted high, as they extended gracefully out—plucked, but not too thin or thick—you could tell her appearance was important to her. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail. But, contrary to how I remembered her in it, she looked dignified and mature. She carried a different aura, and I regarded it in a similar fashion as that of the therapist. Megan was now professional, intellectual, and her demeanor foreign to my recollection—she had

changed, but my perception of her had not. And it became clear that, by continuing to regard her as I had when we met, I failed to see her developing maturity throughout the marriage...

“I never would have thought we’d change so much,” I replied earnestly, reflecting upon ourselves when we first met. And, in doing so, I could see the picture of Megan in my head transform from who she’d been to who she’d become.

“I remember loving you and you loving me. But a child and time—the distance between us—so much has changed. And now the love I remember doesn’t fit with our life... I’ve fallen out of love with you and it scares me,” I thought, losing sight of who was speaking in my mental banter. Megan and I sat alone in an empty room listening to my thoughts representing our mutual concern.

“I don’t want a divorce—I may not love you but that’s not to say I won’t again. I still care for you, very much, and I can see strength enough to rebuild the love we’ve lost,” I concluded in mind... if only, if only...

“Mr. Larrenberg?” the therapist asked in an exasperated tone. Megan was giving me a dirty look, and it was clear they’d noticed how aloof I’d been throughout the session.

“I’m sorry,” I replied, doing my best to sound sincere. “I just... haven’t been myself.”

CHAPTER 7

When I first opened my eyes after attempting to kill myself, I didn't know if I'd succeeded or not. There was a fear, anticipation, and curiosity of what I'd see... The potential to be born anew... Were all the Christian kids judging me in mass right? Would I be brought back as a goat or a tapeworm? Was I deserving of heaven, or damned to hell? Had I simply ceased to exist, but, was too stupid to get it right? Nope... I could hear my heart beat. Actually, it was the phone off the hook... "Fuck the cops are gonna be here soon," I thought to myself.

I gradually peeled my face from the sickly mess of vomit I'd left on the carpet. It had spread wide across the floor, still reeking of the alcohol I'd forced down moments before I lost consciousness. My vision was blurry, my thoughts were retarded. I stumbled over to my front door, as I was still quite drunk, and unlocked it for when the police came. All the lights were off in my place and, by anyone else's account, it would have been empty... Lana hadn't come back yet.

I found my way to the bathroom and collapsed onto the toilet, my ass sinking into it since I'd left the seat up. I squirmed and fought against the bowl as best I could with what little energy I had and eventually freed myself. I patted my ass, finding my pants soaked through with toilet water. I tried to swear, but talking made me want to puke. Since the toilet was no longer a suitable seat, I decided to use the floor and collapsed against the wall, sliding slowly down it thereafter.

A fat broomstick was sticking out of my bathtub, oozing something onto the floor... I couldn't think straight... I couldn't see straight... why was the floor wet? I made a huffing noise and let my chin fall against my chest. I smacked my lips together and rolled my eyes, breathing heavily. I was somewhere between life and death—probably hungover. I watched my hands curl up, lifeless on my lap while I focused on my heartbeat—fast, prominent, and unusually audible. I placed my hands down to try and push myself up, but the floor was too wet and I slid to the side. I scowled and pulled my hands to my shirt to wipe off whatever covered the floor... Blood... lots of it.

I quickly patted myself down, to see where it was coming from. But I couldn't find a wound. There was blood everywhere—or I assumed there was, as my vision was blurred and the floor was a deep red. I began to panic, I kept trying to pick myself up, but it was too slippery. My hands and feet squeaked on the linoleum as I let out groans of frustration. I looked over to the broomstick still hanging over the side of my bathtub and grabbed onto it for support... My vision was worse than I thought—it wasn't a broomstick. It was somebody's wrist... I shrieked and pulled back against the wall. I slid along the floor, smearing myself with blood until I reached the livingroom carpet. Once there, I paused and tried to regain my composure.

I looked back into the bathroom, my vision beginning to return. There was the figure of a person sprawled in the tub, one arm dangling over the side. I rubbed my eyes to try and wake myself. But this wasn't a dream. The phone was still off the hook; suddenly the police coming didn't sound appealing. I scrambled to my feet and rushed to the door, locking it, for when the police came. I looked down at myself, stained through with blood, and began to undress. I ripped off my shirt, and charged into the kitchen looking for a garbage can. I removed my socks, noticing that my hands were trembling profusely. In fact, my entire body was shaking... What the fuck is going on?

Ten minutes later saw me sitting naked at the kitchen table, attempting to pour a spoonful of sugar into my coffee without it shaking all over the floor. I didn't look in the bathroom—I didn't want to look in the bathroom. It's best to just let the police come, investigate, and find out what happened. I won't do anything but contaminate the crime scene, if that's even what it is. Problem is—what if I'm the killer? Or what if the person's not dead and needs medical attention? What if there's someone else in the apartment that I don't know about who's waiting to get me, too? Maybe they broke in and thought I was already dead... What if I know the person in the tub? What if it's Lana?

I stood up and leaned over the table, feeling woozy. I could sense my complexion change, as a sickly flush of goose bumps and chills ran up and down my body. I mumbled something to myself... incomprehensible... I wasn't hung over, I was in shock. The kitchen's florescent lighting exaggerated the stains I'd brought with me from the washroom. Even though I'd scrubbed hard enough to peel the skin from my body, I was still tainted red. My clothes were buried beneath mounds of used up, pink, paper towels... I was cold... I pressed my palm against the wall and poked my head out to see into the living room. The TV was still on, but without any volume. The apartment was quiet and still. I startled myself, as my eyes came to rest on my frail naked reflection in one of the windows. As I drew my arm along the wall for support, my fingertips eventually came to rest on the doorframe of my washroom. I took a few deep breaths, closed my eyes, and stepped in.

I could feel a cool moisture on my feet. The room had a musky smell to it—extinguished candles, residual steam, a corpse. I counted to three and opened my eyes... my vision was back. A dark-haired woman lay still in a placid pool. She was naked and had sunk far enough into the tub to be covered by the crimson water. She was pale... her eyes closed, her face sunken into a solemn, heartbroken expression. She had been beautiful. Her arm still hung over the side of the tub, but it no longer bled. I stood still—as lifeless as she. Every

breath I took, move I made, seemed disrespectful. I remained motionless as long as I could manage—staring at her. The room echoed an eerie silence, and I felt nauseous. She was perfectly still—no breath, no heartbeat, dead.

On her visible arm I could see her wrist was slashed deep. Long, large cuts ran up and down her forearm... It was suicide... Her fingertips were cut as well, likely by loss of fine motor movements. It seemed that she used every last bit of life in her to kill herself. I couldn't see the razor, which led me to believe her other hand, submerged in the water, still clasped it. I took a deep breath and shuddered. I pulled my hands up to my face to see that I was crying... I'd only cried once before in my life... The accident... Tears streamed down my face and I felt a bizarre numbness, suitable for a lifetime of torment. I looked at my feet to see them silhouetted with blood. This was surreal—impossible—What had happened while I was unconscious? How did she get into my apartment?

I left the washroom and closed the door. I had gone from uncontrollable tears of shock to visceral, gut-wrenching wails. Something about how I was feeling didn't fit with what was happening. It was overtly horrible, yet I could feel a cool sensation in the back of my mind, as if I knew more—as though I knew her, or what had happened. I collapsed on the floor, once again in a pool of my own vomit. I began to convulse as the room swirled. And then, before I knew it, I'd lost consciousness—with any luck to dream a better reality.

CHAPTER 8

“Can you hear me?” a voice said in a loud, stern tone. I rolled my eyes back into my head, trying to convince my eyelids to follow. I was in my apartment and all the lights were on—gleaming full-blast onto my face as I lay on the floor... What the fuck is going on?... A man stood over me, his face hidden by contrast of the lights. As my attention returned, he became visible, and I remembered what had happened.

“Whoa, hold on a sec,” the man exclaimed, placing a hand on my chest to prevent me from sitting up. “We got a call from a man reporting a suicide, was that you?” the man asked, giving me an intense look though it was clear he was trying to be gentle. I breathed heavily, looking back towards my bathroom, expecting to cry. But I felt nothing—and what I could recall feeling was all but gone, save for a certainty that it had happened.

“I don’t know how she got in here,” I blurted out in a cold voice, despite my best efforts to convey just how disturbing the situation was. I looked down at myself and realized I was still naked. There were some clothes next to me that I assumed the man had pulled out of my dirty laundry basket. I reached for them but gave up early as the man held me still.

“She? Is there somebody else in the apartment?” the man asked, looking up and to his side at a police officer I hadn’t noticed. He stood next to my closed bathroom door, bored, with only our conversation to entertain him.

“I...” I stuttered, having passed out before deciding what to say about the dead woman in my bathroom. “I’ve never met her before!” I shouted, assuming the questions were due to their discovering her body. But the bathroom door was still closed and it was possible they had no idea she was there. Suddenly I felt a need to shut up, protect myself, and figure out any further course of action after the police left. I knew that if they found her I’d be a suspect, and I didn’t trust my recollection enough to argue innocence.

“Never met who?” the man asked, giving a confused look to the officer.

“Nothing... it was just a dream,” I tried to explain, making sure not to look at the bathroom door.

“Are you the man who called about the suicide?” he repeated, doing his best to address only the necessary points to my survival.

“Yes,” I replied, after a long pause. I hadn’t anticipated being conscious when the police arrived, let alone having to deal with a corpse... The medication I was on was supposed to have serious consequences when combined with alcohol. Maybe that was why the woman was here—maybe it was a dream, or I’d hallucinated... No. Even reality didn’t feel that real.

“What did you take?” the man asked, examining me with questions to try and avoid a trip to the emergency room.

“Alcohol,” I muttered, my thoughts overwhelming my speech.

“I can see that,” he joked, for the amusement of the officer as he fidgeted by the pool of my puke. “Did you take anything else?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I replied, realizing that I’d been staring at my bathroom door. I turned away sharply and looked at the floor.

“Look, we’re gonna need you to come with us, ok?” the man explained, adjusting himself to help me up. “Do you think you can walk?”

“Yeah,” I said, doing my best to keep from getting my vomit on the man helping me. I wobbled to my feet and found that, although I was still drunk, the experience with the woman had been quite sobering. The man who had been asking me questions handed me clothes slowly and helped me dress... All I had to do was go with them, and they wouldn’t find her, I repeated in mind... I grasped furniture for help as the man tried to steady me on the way out. The officer gave me an aggravated look, as though I should apologize for wasting his time. I sympathized with him. Suicide is always more glamorous in mind—truth is that sometimes the only people who care are the ones who have to clean up after you.

“What’s your name?” the man asked, trying to be friendly so that I’d continue to cooperate.

“Larrenberg,” I replied, feeling a cramp in my stomach that saw me bend forward and puke all over the officer’s shoes before he had a chance to move aside. And as I gazed at the slimy mess I’d left on his feet, I frowned for reasons beyond knowing the shitty treatment I’d just earned myself. Who the hell was Larrenberg? I sure as shit wasn’t, and I’d never met anyone by that name to put the thought in my head. But before I could think any more, I was rushed out the door—finding some relief that they hadn’t discovered the body.

CHAPTER 9

The cops didn't suspect a thing beyond my stupidity. The poor and desperate attempt to take my own life had gone swimmingly. I was still alive and, if played correctly, would be back together with Lana soon enough. But I didn't feel guilty about it. I didn't even think I should feel guilty. Lana had made the mistake of leaving me; I'd only done what was necessary to remedy it. Only... apparently, I'd killed a woman somewhere along the way. Suddenly getting back together with Lana was the least of my concerns.

I arrived back at the apartment completely devoid of feeling as usual. But my mind was busy examining how I had felt. What had happened to me when I found the corpse soaking in my bathtub, along with my deluded attempts to rationalize things. But... the back of my mind held a residual taste of the feelings I'd had. Inexplicable as it was, I knew I'd killed her. Riding in the back of the squad-car I'd seen it... A distinct recollection of my hands wrapped tightly around her throat as I squeezed the life from her... I'd killed her— whoever she was.

I paced around my living room, stepping on the vomit now dried into the carpet. The bathroom door was still closed... she was in there, and I was in serious shit. All the ways movies and television tell you to dispose of bodies are too complicated and impractical for the average individual. I didn't have a wood chipper or a pig farm. I didn't have the stomach to transfer and anchor the body, drop it in the water, and get out of town. I couldn't stash it here, because I knew the smell of decaying flesh would guarantee the loss of my damage

deposit. And, despite every inhuman, immoral, and devious thought that crossed my mind, I still felt nothing more than a vague recognition of giving a shit once upon a time.

I'd picked up a pack of cigarettes for the occasion. Villains always smoke. But I was new at the whole murder thing, so it took me half the pack to realize I'd need more than a nicotine buzz... How could I have killed someone? Who was she anyway? I stomped the butt out amidst the dried pool of barf. I walked to my closet and dug furiously through it. I pulled out a scuba mask, snow pants, a rain coat, rubber gloves, and a hair net. First thing's first: cleanup.

I suited up and braced for impact. I had to expect to feel something again when I opened that door. I had to expect to cry for the rest of the day, to be tortured time and time again. I needed to feel that. I had to lose my breath to remorse and collapse, too ashamed to go on living. But, as always, I felt nothing... As always, I knew what I should be feeling, but couldn't pull it off.

I stared, point-blank, at the closed door. My hand hovered over the knob and my mind drifted to places unknown. I watched the light reflecting off the gold of the doorknob, swirling and morphing into distinct forms. They grew and spread, eventually filling the room until they were all that remained... The woman in the bathtub... It was her, sitting in a hospital chair crying. But in the bed next to her was what held my focus. What caught my attention and quickened my heart... the little girl from the accident... it was... already gone and something anew. Now I saw the woman yelling, smiling, talking, dancing... I saw everything before her death. I saw her over and over again—too fast to understand, too much to comprehend. And then... nothing. The room returned to normal, and I was left stunned and confused, my hand still hovering above the knob.

I pushed the door open and held my breath. She was still there... silent, cold and dead. I waddled in my snow pants until I stood next to the bathtub. The floor was soaked in blood, spread along the tiles. And then something

caught my eye that I hadn't noticed before... a blood-soaked green post-it, the writing of which had faded, save for one word: Josh. My name. I leaned over and plucked it from the ground, trembling as I brought it closer to me... emotion was coming back... I could feel it brooding. I wouldn't have composure for long—I wouldn't be much of anything but a complete fucking mess for the rest of the night. But it was inevitable—whatever I felt, whatever I saw, was necessary for me to understand this.

I stared at her face—beautiful. A pale, china doll expression and complexion. The rosy color of her cheeks that I recalled, had faded. Her face was on the tip of my memory, and her name the tip of my tongue... I knew her... but from more than just the accident... from more than just my dreams... from... Suddenly her eyes opened, fixed on me. I took a few steps back, startled and afraid. She held a cool gaze on me, making no expression or gesture. Her hazel eyes dropped to my feet and drew a line up my body—if I didn't know better I'd have sworn she were checking me out... her face white, suspended in a blood-soaked pool. Her arms, mutilated and cold. She was dead, but her eyes were alive...

The blood in the tub began to move. It swirled and churned around her still figure, draining away to leave a flutter of fabric upon her. After a few moments more, it became a blood-red evening gown. Next the curtains fell, growing legs and silverware. The floor became dark hardwood and before I knew it I was seated across from the woman in the middle of a crowded restaurant. Her eyes came to rest upon mine, and she smiled.

“Josh, right?” she exclaimed, her voice swaying as though she were nervous.

“Yeah,” I muttered, taken aback by the scenery. This was fake... a vision... a memory... god knows what. But it felt real... it felt... I felt.

“It's nice to meet you,” she stated, extending her hand to shake mine. I flinched momentarily, recalling the gashes upon her arms. But they were gone...

she was back to the way she had been before I found her... before I had killed her. She was born anew and I was off the hook... save for question.

“You too,” I mumbled, examining my surroundings. A baby-blue overtone to an eggshell base. Fine china, tall pillars, open space and packed seating. Mellow jazz played over the sound system and the waiter dropped off a bottle of red wine.

“So... Lana didn’t really tell me much about you other than what you do,” she said, taking a whisper-sip of her wine and adjusting her place in her seat... she was anxious.

“Lana?” I asked, now completely fucking lost as to what was happening. How did she know Lana? How had she heard about me?

“Well, what’s the rest?” she answered playfully, though making little sense.

“The rest?” I blurted out, growing increasingly uncomfortable. She stared at me, nodding her head and smiling every so often, almost as though she were listening to me speak. I watched her movements and expressions, scowling and fidgeting as I did so... This wasn’t real—I had to keep reminding myself of that. But it was important—it had to be. Because... I felt anxious too. I felt my heartbeat quicken and my mouth go dry. I worried about what she thought, concerned about the progress of the conversation, and fixated on the mild amount of cleavage she showed that I insisted on keeping my eyes off... This was a first date. I had been magically transported to a romantic encounter with my murder victim.

“I guess in the end, you have the beginning,” she stated, smiling. I took another look around the room, stopping as I came to look upon my reflection—in it I was younger and had a different hair cut. I looked... happy. Her lips peeled apart and her cheeks rose. I stared at her teeth, fixated on her beauty... I felt love, I felt hope... I saw a future here... It didn’t make any

sense, but that didn't matter. For once, I felt something more than nothing... And as I stared into her eyes I knew I needed answers. I knew I couldn't bury this with her... Megan Larrenberg...

I was back in the bathroom. Her eyes were closed and her head had fallen slightly to the side, her face pointed in my direction. My hand had become submerged in the water and I grasped something tiny that I'd plucked from the woman's hand. I stared into the opaque water and slowly pulled my hand out. As the liquid rushed off my arm I unwrapped my fingers to reveal a white seashell resting in my palm. I stared at it, amazed and horrified. I'd either gone insane or found a way to my sanity. Megan Larrenberg... she held the answers... she knew about the accident I'd caused... and by her word she knew about me... She was alive somewhere—I knew it. Corpse aside, I'd never been so sure of anything. I'd find her; I'd find answers.

I pushed back from the tub, coming to rest upon my knees. I caressed the shell, feeling it pump emotion into me. Feeling things the likes of which I could never have imagined. The woman... Megan Larrenberg... The fact that I could see her dead body... that I could touch her blood, bathe in silence, and smell her perfume—it didn't matter or compare to the significance of what I felt. Nothing mattered compared to that. And, as I sat, I pulled myself enough from reverie to see that I would see her again... I had been whispering it without realizing. I said it over and over again.

“I see her again... I see her again...”

Deep, thunderous poundings emanated from my front door and I didn't have time to think twice. I rushed from the washroom, taking a final look at the woman before I left... I was committed now—I'd chase a dead woman for the certainty that she was alive, and I wouldn't stop for anything short of resolution. I'd never had answers from the accident; I'd never been content... nevertheless I'd all the reason to leave town. I'd no reason to linger—or go on living, for that matter. The questions and, more importantly, feelings trapped in

my mind were all that I had. And, as I came to my front door to peep through the peephole I was all the more certain of my decision. Two disgruntled-looking officers stood on the other side of the door. I had to leave. Now.

CHAPTER 6

Ten months later saw me sitting at the dinner table having an arranged breakfast with my wife and daughter. We chatted absentmindedly to one another of the day we'd planned at the zoo... Ten months of sacrifice and compromise... Our marriage was stable, stronger than it had been before but in a different way. Megan said she loved me, and I believed her. We had taken hold of our life—no longer the makings of one... history not promise. And in that was both hope and fear—the days ahead could make or break our love; shape our life or see it end.

“Hey!” Megan hollered, swinging a phone before my eyes. “It’s your brother.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said, taking the phone from her and resting it on my shoulder. “Aaron?” I asked, hearing a rustling in the background.

“Hey brother, how are yah?” he chimed, springing onto the line in an overly-enthused way. Something must be wrong.

“Hey, I’m fine. How ‘bout you?” I sighed, taking note of Megan’s unrest. She’d never liked Aaron, and I never blamed her for it. After all, it was his fault they didn’t get along. His personality was too blunt for her. Not to mention that when they first met he said that Christians were, “dogma zombies sporting hard-ons for Jesus.” After that, Megan didn’t feel much need to get to know him further.

My older brother, Aaron, was my polar opposite so far as genetics would allow. He was blonde, blue eyed, lanky, and obtuse. He'd never had kids. He'd never gone to college or married. He still lived in the old brick house we grew up in on the other side of town. But it wasn't long ago that our mother had to be taken care of full-time... after her stroke... Before I insisted on sending her away where we could never visit... Ever since that we'd grown further apart. And we kept one another at a distance ever since.

"Not so good," he groaned, some light chatter in the background.

"Why, what's up?" I asked, signaling to my wife that I'd try to make the call as brief as possible. She glared at me a moment before turning back towards Annie who was absorbed in a cartoon.

"Well, I came home and there was a guy in the house."

"What?" I coughed, gagging on my cup of coffee-soaked sugar.

"Yeah, I don't know. He was just there."

"Who was he?" I inquired, now worried about my brother for reasons beyond our customary uncomfortable silences and heated debates about our mother's well-being.

"No clue. But I tried to call the cops and he ran," he explained, his account one of bewilderment not anger.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. We had a little bit of a fight by the door, but he got away."

"You called the cops though, right?" I exclaimed, making eye contact with Megan who was now interested in our conversation.

“Yeah, they’re here now,” he mumbled, changing his tone now that I was in the know. “Anyway, the reason I’m calling is because during the struggle the flag got a little torn up.”

“Oh. I’m just glad you’re ok,” I stated, wrapping up my concern as Aaron’s temperament shifted to the usual cold shoulder. The flag he’d called about was the one our mother had received from the military after our father’s death. It never seemed to matter much to Aaron. I suppose he remembered our father well enough without it. But it had always been important to me.

“Just thought I’d tell you now so there won’t be any questions later,” he explained, making it clear his call served no purpose beyond pre-empting a dispute.

“Sure,” I grunted, feeling everything Aaron and I didn’t agree on linger in our silence.

“I’ll talk to you later,” he exclaimed, rushing off the line.

“Aaron,” I said, watching Annie giggle as she and Megan enjoyed a cartoon.

“Yeah?”

“If you need anything... help cleaning up the place or some company when you’re filing police reports. Well... just give me a call,” I stated, making the effort I always did when I spoke with him. The line was quiet for a moment and, if I hadn’t made the same gesture before, I might have been hopeful. He hung up without replying, and the heartbeat of the now vacant line echoed my own. I placed the receiver down and lifted my eyes to meet Megan’s. She wore a concerned face, knowing I needed it after every time I spoke with him.

“Is everything ok?” she asked, watching Annie trot to the front door to retrieve her shoes.

“No. It’s the same as always.”

CHAPTER 10

Ten months later saw me sitting at a diner table enjoying a cup of coffee tipped on half a bagel, resting squarely under my elbow... Ten months of hiding and seeking... I'd grown a beard—fugitive style, which, contrary to its purpose, made me look like an axe murderer. My clothes were plain. I wore no rings. I showed no identifiable marks. I was a ghost. Meanwhile, my head was wrapped around yet another map as I pored myself over each town's name, praying I'd feel something vivid enough to chase.

“Shit,” I muttered, as I pulled the map away from the table to see that some of my spilled coffee had absorbed into it. I made a few attempts to dry it, failed, and left it to rot. I paid the bill and strolled out to my new car. Why did I steal the Lincoln? It didn't make me feel anything special; it was just a poor choice of grand theft... poor, but necessary.

I dropped my ass into the driver's seat and threw my studies in the back. The graffiti of potato chip crumbs laden with hairballs and dirty clothes covered the interior. Life on the road wasn't a life at all—only a border of existence I longed desperately to escape from. I turned the ignition and made my way slowly around the back of the place; finding luck in a shaded parking space. I put on the emergency brake and reclined the front seat. Sleeping during the day meant I could travel when there was less traffic at night—it made running easier.

I stared at a question mark drawn on the dashboard of my car. If a stolen Lincoln and a forgotten memory was the sum of my life, perhaps prison

was preferable. Maybe turning myself in would be the wisest thing to do. But I didn't feel I'd done anything wrong. I didn't feel at all. Except when... glimpses... whispers... an obsession misconstrued for madness... The woman in the bathtub—pale, silent. To think of her now is to know that what I had is gone... To dwell in my lust for feeling for beyond feelings I have nothing.

Sleeplessness. I rolled onto my side and gathered a few handfuls of paper—scribbled thoughts brought on by fleeting glimpses of emotion. All that I had left was what I'd convinced myself was worth chasing. The yellow post-its were happy ones—children playing, couples holding hands. The red post-its were morbid ones—the accident, the woman in the bathtub. The green ones—they were triggers; the things I'd established brought forth feeling in myself... if you can even call it feeling.

I took a deep breath as I popped the lid to the box of post-its, removing a small seashell as I'd done every night since its discovery. The wave of feeling that surged through me upon even the sight of it was surreal—a perplexing memento breeding both joy and sorrow. My lip quivered as I plucked it from its colorful nest and cradled it in my hands. This time I felt love, a sublime climax filling my heart and calming my nerves. Times like these made me remember why I was doing this, why I had to keep doing this. But as usual, the feeling was fleeting. And soon enough I was back to dull and lifeless. I quickly put it back in the box to avoid feeling the horrors it would invariably bring... Yet every time I pried the shell from my hands, my eyes lingered where it slept; I longed for it and the possibilities it held. But I knew its bittersweet gift to me as I had grasped it once-too-long before. My heart had caved in on itself and my soul burned. To date, it was the most intense of the triggers I'd discovered—purely emotional, no hallucinations on the side like some of the others. Unfortunately, such simple joys were few and far between—providing no further lead or clue for my endeavor.

I let out a breath after a long while spent contemplating whether I should waste another. The day had seen me gain nothing but age and one more dead end... Perhaps I'd missed something... I needed to be more thorough, to go back into town and check again. To find whatever it was that compelled me to come here... Because when you can't feel anything, a feeling goes a long way towards deciding what you do.

CHAPTER 7

“B-I-N-G-O!” my daughter yelled as my wife and I unhinged our seatbelts. I stared at the zoo doors. This designated family outing was but one of many to try and save the marriage. Megan had held my hand during the drive. Funny how something so simple could make me feel so good. It’s the little things that matter most; it’s the big things that see you forget them.

“Ok, so what do you want to see today?” I asked, as we unloaded from the car and jogged across the road that separated the parking lot and the zoo.

“I wanna see the antfibins,” Annie gleamed, doing her best to mimic the Discovery Channel.

“The what?” Megan asked, maneuvering her way around an uncomfortably large SUV.

“Antfibins,” she repeated. “And then I wanna see the monkeys.”

“Amphibians,” I whispered in Megan’s ear as she opened her mouth to inquire further about Annie’s plans.

“Oh,” she laughed, coming to the counter to pay our dues. I directed my attention to our daughter as Megan shelled out X number of dollars to ensure the animals stayed behind bars. “Honey,” she said, placing her hand on my arm. “The office just called. Can you watch Annie? I need to get back to them.”

“Sure,” I exclaimed, equipping the grimace I’d learned in therapy to address my wife’s constant deadlines and obligations beyond our marriage and Annie.

Annie and I plodded over to a nearby bench and parked ourselves on it. Her feet dangled over the edge as she leaned back. Her eyes were set on Megan, who paced abruptly while talking on her cell phone. I felt a need to explain why her mother was so busy, but I could tell she already knew. Watching her, I thought of how much she’d grown—one of those quintessential parental reflections. She wasn’t oblivious to the troubles between her mother and me... I could see sensitivity on her part—a spark of understanding I’d mitigated with the assumption that such thoughts were beyond her. But nevertheless I could see by her actions and expressions that she was worried. Knowing that she knew also meant thinking of what she might think. Suddenly I felt selfish and stupid. The work Megan and I had put into the marriage brought change. And though we had acted in the best interests of Annie’s future, we had neglected to address the impact it would have on her now.

“Everything ok?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she sighed, looking at Megan once more.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, failing to take my fatherly bait. I bit my lip to keep from suggesting things that could be bothering her. But, as Megan approached us, I had no need of further prompting. Annie’s spirits picked up again and we walked, as a family, to the reptile house.

CHAPTER 8

“I’m worried about Annie,” I told Megan, as I watched an elephant take a crap.

“Why? She seems fine,” she replied, making a disgusted face as she caught on to what I was looking at.

“I don’t know, she wouldn’t talk to me about it,” I answered, double-checking on Annie, who wasn’t far away. “Could you try talking to her?”

“Sure,” she responded, somewhat surprised by what I’d asked. She smiled at me and I could tell she took my request to be a measure of good faith. “But what could be bothering her?”

“I think it has to do with how we’ve been acting lately. I mean it’s nothing bad, but at the same time there’s been a distinct change in the way we are with one another—and the way we’ve been with her. I just want to make sure there’s no confusion or apprehension on her part,” I explained, taking note of Annie heading our way with a recently acquired balloon.

“Look!” Annie cried, pulling on the string tied to a bright pink balloon.

“Where’d you get that?” Megan inquired, taking Annie’s hand as we turned to exit the zoo.

“From the clown,” she replied, as we walked past the nocturnal exhibit. “Can I get an ice cream?” she asked, catching eye of a vendor just before we cleared gift shop row.

“Sure,” I stated, thinking an ice cream cone a reasonable treat compared to some of the overpriced stuff the other children had coaxed out of their parents. “What kind do you want?”

“Strawberry, please,” she said in a delighted tone.

“Strawberry it is,” I replied, turning my attention to Megan thereafter. “I’ll grab a cone and meet you at the car.

“Vanilla, please,” Megan answered, acknowledging my decree by way of a demand.

“Sure,” I laughed, turning towards the ice cream vendor. Megan and Annie walked out to the parking lot holding hands. But, before they were out of sight, I heard Megan’s cell phone go off. Who knows, maybe these things couldn’t wait for a reasonable time.

“What can I get for you?” the ice cream vendor asked as I moved to first in line.

“May I please have one vanilla and one strawberry?” I said, hearing a faint screech, likely from one of the tropical birds cooped up nearby.

“Cones or cups?”

“Cones, please,” I replied, watching a bald man pluck an ice cube from an exhausted beverage and rub it on his scalp.

“That’ll be five thirty-four.”

“Here you go,” I stated, handing him a twenty.

“Hot day isn’t it?”

“Very,” I said, confused as I saw two men run up to the front counter of the zoo and begin screaming at the woman working it. She picked up the phone and frantically dialed a number. “She gonna be ok?” I asked, directing the vendor’s attention to the woman.

“Probably,” he shrugged, handing me my ice cream cones and change. “Have a nice day.”

“Thanks, you too,” I exclaimed, walking towards the front entrance as the two men who had been making a scene ran in the direction from which they had come. The woman they had been disturbing seemed distraught, and soon pulled out a ‘closed’ sign to adorn her booth. She exited through the back door and quickly began walking in the direction of the two men.

As I exited the zoo, I could hear an incomprehensible commotion. I turned towards the parking lot to see a circle of people huddled around a car parked in the middle of the street. Some lingered on the outskirts, rubber-necking with concerned faces, cameras held ready should the crowd have gathered for reasons worth capturing. The two men and the woman from the zoo were among the people in the crowd, huddled close to the car. I saw people bending down and moving around to try and get a better look at whatever was worth the fuss. I paused where I stood, wondering what had happened.

A middle-aged woman wearing thick bifocals and a dark-blue golf shirt turned away from the scene after she’d seen enough to satisfy her curiosity. Her hand shot to her mouth and her face shriveled in horror. Two young children stood patiently outside the crowd, confused by her sudden disarray. As they began to approach her—no doubt inquiring about what had happened—she stretched out her arms to turn their heads away from the vehicle.

A man and a woman in their early twenties stood to the right of the car, rubbing the back of their necks. Their faces were numb, as though a sudden blow to the head had rendered them incapable of anything but observing. As the crowd shifted, her hand clutched his pant leg and she cringed. He pulled her close to him and she reciprocated—they were both disturbed.

I frowned, as it was now clear that something serious had occurred. A dark liquid crept from under the car, visible only by its reflective borders gracing the asphalt. Perhaps someone was trapped inside, or it had been a hit-and-run. But, from the looks of the vehicle, there was no damage—there were too many people crowded around it to see what the problem was. The noise around the car increased as more people came to investigate. There were now fifteen to twenty, huddled either immediately next to the vehicle, or bordering the scene. I felt a stern shove from behind me, as a couple of zoo workers rushed past carrying first aid kits. I fumbled with the ice cream cones I'd been holding, only to see them fall to the ground.

“Shit,” I muttered, turning my palm up to see it stained with strawberry ice cream.

I looked back to the commotion, but a gust of wind pulled my eyes to a variance of color in a nearby tree. The rustling of leaves became white noise that echoed above the group. The sun dipped behind the only cloud in the sky, providing me enough shade to focus on a bright pink balloon caught between two branches... The crowd stepped back to make room for the zoo workers with medical supplies, but nobody could look away. I scanned the faces in the crowd, hearing the distant siren of an ambulance pairing my wife's tormented screams—she sat on the curb, her hands pressed firmly over her eyes. People cradled her... consoled her. But the visceral, gut-wrenching wails that shook her body made

many too afraid to approach. I bit into my tongue, staring at Megan from afar. Her cries had turned her face a deep red—matching the blood on her hands.

CHAPTER 11

I dropped a phonebook next to my hashbrowns for some light morning reading. My back was stiff from sleeping in the car, and I could tell from the waitress' expression that I needed a shower. But if I was going to stick around and investigate the town, I'd have to save money every way I could—free refills of coffee meant energy without shelling out cash for calories.

“Anything else?” the waitress asked, staying at a noticeable distance.

“Refill,” I stated, slamming back a full cup of coffee-soaked sugar. I pulled my finger down the delicate page of the phonebook while prepping a crumpled napkin to scribble down addresses. Lambert... Lapner... Larrenberg—three listings this time... Aaron, Jake and... Megan... I have to concentrate to get my hand to write it... Megan Larrenberg... I swallowed air as the moisture sucked out of my mouth. I'd only found one Megan Larrenberg before but she wasn't what I was looking for. Unfortunately, that's easy to say when you're not sure what you're after... The search was getting thin and I knew it. I didn't have enough to understand, and I didn't even know if there was more to find—looking for a reason to look. Had I the capacity to feel, I'd no doubt have lost hope.

“You're welcome,” the waitress groaned, walking away from my table to serve yet another eat-and-run-jackass.

The diner was as monotonous and indistinct as inside-out road kill. The room sounded of light chatter, rattling ventilation, and a sizzling grill pissing

grease into the air. The waitresses were coming down from their night shifts; ready to head home and tend to the babies they'd had as kids. Truckers and bikers sat hunched over, their guts pressed up against their tables, breathing heavily as they filled their mouths with slop. The horseshoe counter prided three fry cooks and made me think of a trough—suitable, as a pig made his way to it. I tensed up and inched towards the side of my booth in case I had to run. I could only hope the cops would have someone better to chase than me.

The officer flipped a pair of convenience-store aviators off his face and planted them next to a badge pinned on his left tit. His facial skin was rough as though it had been slashed and dried—short, unshaven hairs played the part of tombstones to long-dead zits. I couldn't hear him speak over the noise in the place, but I watched him intently nevertheless. He pulled a used newspaper in front of him and seemed to relax. I exhaled nervously and eyed the exit. If he looked up from his plate for anything more than an adoring leer at a waitress' ass, I'd have to throw patience to the wind and slither away. But nobody paid him any mind or reverence above that of the other bums who'd stopped in for a bite; I assumed him a regular.

On the far side of the diner, a couple's argument became the crowd's concern. She screamed and pounded on the table, while he hissed and grabbed her by the arm—squeezing hard enough for her complexion to change. Everyone gave quick glances to the couple and adjusted themselves uncomfortably in their seats. I watched the officer, waiting for him to settle the dispute. But he didn't move. He kept his head down as though he didn't even hear them. I assumed this had happened before, and screaming bouts were as common as a side of bacon.

I turned uncomfortably back to the phone book to finish writing addresses and numbers. I had to find each person and satisfy my curiosity enough so that I would never look back. I couldn't leave a trail or any indication that someone had been looking. Delusional, I was quickly becoming paranoid. I

fidged in my booth from a cold sensation that made me think I'd been made. I glanced up quickly to catch the cop scanning me up and down. The couple had only gotten louder, yet his attention was on me. I bit down hard onto the inside of my cheek, and did my best to make my leaving look natural.

I shook a few bills out of my wallet and walked quickly towards the door. But he still watched me, turning his chair to follow my movements—something nobody but me seemed to notice or regard as odd. It was clear he had an interest in me, but I didn't care to stick around to find out why. I pressed my palm on the window of the front door instead of the handle and leaned into it. Glare from the sun caught my eye as I pushed the door open, revealing an infinite regress of faded handprints hidden in the glass.

The gravel of the parking lot crunched under my feet as I walked to my stolen car. I wondered if it was what sparked the cop's interest in me, but I couldn't spot his vehicle and assumed him ignorant. The sweltering sun smeared the horizon like tears on a finger painting. I raised my hands to my face, shading my eyes enough to see the road I'd have to travel. A freshly paved highway was my ticket back to town—same as before.

CHAPTER 9

It was black at first. Quiet. The nursing staff had slowed down since we had arrived. The place seemed empty—no wails or cries of agony—only the faint sound of my daughter’s heartbeat, amplified by the machine she now depended on for life. I stood in front of the double-doors of the emergency wing. Megan was answering questions she’d no doubt be asking herself for the rest of her life. I couldn’t move. Annie’s seashell necklace dangled in my hand—I’d picked it off the pavement before they closed the ambulance. White light filled the hallway, but dissipated as it approached my feet. The lights were off in the waiting room—clearly after visiting hours. They’d told me I could see her, but I hadn’t gone yet. I took a deep breath and held it—frozen.

Standing there was my last fight before I gave into reality. Because for that moment it hadn’t happened and she was alright—would be alright. But, when I stepped into that room, what I had of my daughter would be lost and all that would remain is to watch her die. It crept up on me—melancholy ripped at my soul—I couldn’t win this fight. She needed me, but I was a coward. And though I wanted to run to her side, hold her, and tell her everything’s alright, I stayed still—because running wouldn’t change what happened or give her strength. I was helpless for the both of us.

The first step’s everything—the rest echo until the last. There was a square foot window in the door before my daughter but I didn’t look

through it. As the beeps of her heartbeat grew louder, more audible, I could feel mine quicken as well. My movements slowed and I felt my eyes swell with tears from no more than the blue paint on the door. You can't prepare for shock and you can't escape death. But then I held my breath enough to give my arm the strength to move. The door cooperated and I was through...

That's not my daughter... that's not my daughter... it can't be... not Annie... there's no way... it's not her... there's been a mistake... that's not my daughter...

She was swollen—red all over... her face lost—stitches remained... her hair was... shaven completely in parts, while untouched in others... her chest was collapsed... held together by god knows what... scrapes from the pavement had peeled the skin from her forearms... tubes and wires surrounded her, pumping hopeless life into her broken veins... that's not my daughter... I felt horror... a grief so terrible and all consuming no person could bear it, no soul could survive it.

The room was still; nothing moved but my quivering lip. I felt faint, empty, consumed with grief. In the distance I could hear Megan sob—alone. I contemplated going to comfort her, but I couldn't move. Tears streamed down my face and my nose plugged. I breathed through my mouth heavily, becoming aware of my own life and its sudden insignificance. Without her I was lost... Annie... I opened my mouth to speak, but choked on words and tears. I wanted to talk to her. To nudge her awake from her slumber and tell her how much I loved her. But the doctors had been blunt. Even if she lived, our daughter was gone.

Thoughts rushed to my head reminding me of what I'd lost. I worried about the weather and if the coat Annie had worn would be warm enough... I remembered that we had to be up early the next morning to

audition for private schools. But it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. I looked upon every day past and those still to come—unable to breath without the thought of her in them.

Every moment that went by became more trivial than the last. I had lived for her—fathered, raised, loved, and adored her. So what thought but agony could I have without her? What was I without her? I felt an anchor in my chest pulling me to the floor. Shock released me to panic's grasp. Nothing mattered—not a goddamn thing. I stumbled to the wall, hugging my sides, and collapsed. I had gone from uncontrollable tears of shock to visceral gut wrenching wails.

And then I gasped, sobbed, and swallowed. The ceiling and walls peeled away by flood of tears. I lay on the ground, a broken, sniveling mess. I practiced what I'd say to her if she woke up—I knew she never would. Still I practiced. Still lived, thought, and breathed as I had every day before. Only now there was no purpose, no reason, no cause—only devastation and question... Why?... Why?... Why?...

CHAPTER 12

...Megan Larrenberg...

After months of doing this I still hadn't come up with a way of explaining it for shit. Every god damn time I thought I was making sense, an eyebrow would twitch or a goose bump would plump. Ultimately, I'd accepted the fact that more than a few people would get really freaked out for my peace of mind. Fortunately, I lacked the ability to feel badly about it.

She eyed onions while I crouched behind the flower display. I ripped a hand of petals from a daisy and ground my teeth. Megan Larrenberg was thirty-something and had come to the store alone. She was wearing an engagement ring and was keeping mostly to herself. As best I could tell, her cart contained little more than bran cereal, toothpaste, and energy bars. My pockets exceeded her cart's bounty as I slipped yet another chocolate bar into my pants—having nothing demands taking something.

“Oh my god,” a woman gasped, standing behind me as I peered through bouquets. I turned, having realized nobody responded to her exclamation, and the silence was a result of my failure to.

“What? You've never seen a guy who likes flowers before?” I snapped, making sure not to lose track of my mark. A teenage girl stared open mouthed at me. She hunched forward in disbelief, trapped in a forest of potted plants. She seemed unusually tall for her age and, as I pulled my gaze down to her feet,

I understood why. She stood without shoes, on top of a mound of soil, pounded into a clay pot. Reefs of balloons bobbed around her neck, yet she paid no mind to anything but me. “I think you stepped in some crazy,” I muttered, hoping nobody would think she was with me.

“I recognize you,” she stated, giving no identifiable signs as to whether or not that was a good thing. “From the paper,” she continued, perplexing me. I stopped to think for a moment, trying not to stare at her feet. I’d only been in the paper once to my knowledge. And that was in a different city, many months before. If she recognized me it was a very bad thing. I glanced out of the corner of my eye to see Megan turn down an isle, out of my field of view. Fuck.

I quickly turned away from the teenager, to continue my pursuit of Megan. But as I caught eye of the exit, I re-thought my plans. How in the hell could she have recognized me? I had a beard now and I wore drifter clothes—nothing like the photo they’d spread on black and white, on behalf of the boys in blue. But nobody had recognized me enough to catch me before. I thought of the officer earlier that morning, and his intense focus on me alone. I stopped walking for a moment and retraced my steps back to a stack of newspapers that had caught my eye. I picked one up and scanned every page, minus ads and comics, for my picture—there was nothing. I glanced back to the flower display where the teenage girl had fingered me, but she was gone—only a large display remained.

I was so close to interrogating another person unfortunate enough to be named Larrenberg—but I knew I had to leave. I could still try the other two listings I’d found in the phonebook. I could still investigate every other lead my gut pointed me towards. For right now, though, I had to put aside the burning questions and get out of harm’s way. She had recognized me for whatever reason; and if she did, that meant others would, too. I caught a final glance of Megan and turned to leave. I’d be back. There are answers here. I know it.

CHAPTER 13

...Jake Larrenberg...

“There’s no way in hell we’re letting you on the tarmac,” a disgruntled attendant at the local airport informed me.

“Well, when’s his next break?” I demanded, fiddling with a pen on a chain.

“Why do you need to talk to him so bad?”

“It’s personal,” I muttered, watching a no-doubtedly bored-off-his-ass employee ride the active baggage carousel while smoking a cigar. He wore some sort of jumpsuit covered in dirt, and a dumbshit grin aimed at me.

“Look, I’ll place a call to see if he’s around, but don’t hold your breath,” the attendant explained, picking up the phone. I paced the two feet in front of the counter, brainstorming what to do if they actually found him. I’d played it every way from pathetic and whiny, to audacious and nosy. This time, blunt was tickling my fancy—I didn’t have the energy to lie to myself anymore, let alone another stranger.

“They said they’d send him up next chance they get, but I don’t know how long that’ll be, so you might as well get comfortable,” the attendant announced, clearly annoyed with my request.

“Do you have a cafeteria or something around here?” I asked, foregoing a ‘thank you’ as my stomach grumbled.

“First left after the restrooms,” he declared, pointing down a long stretch of airline check-ins. I made a sharp turn and walked speedily away.

As I stood in line—hands in pockets, expressionless face—I questioned myself and my motives beyond the answers I’d prepared. I’d been on the road for ten months. I’d been away from the life I’d made, and the wife I’d lost. I deserted everything on a whim and regretted it more than I could have imagined. I hated my life. And though what I had before was an unbearable lie, what I had now was... Nothing mattered anymore... I have, and am, nothing but what I seek—nothing but what I aspire to, and feel I once had.

“Sir?” an annoyed attendant at the airport MacDonald’s asked as I moved to first in line.

“Quarter-pounder and a strawberry shake,” I muttered, scraping my pockets for cash. Ten self-deprecating thoughts later and I was served. I took a seat at a nearby booth and squeezed my burger enough to drain its shape. The bun and patty melded together and my lips followed. I stared down at the leaking lid of my milkshake and felt my heart explode. I turned my palm up to see it stained with strawberry ice cream. I exhaled loudly and dropped my burger. I could feel it creep up on me—I’d felt this before. Melancholy ripped at my soul. My eyes flooded with tears and I was paralyzed. My elbows screeched along the table and my head fell into my hands. The feeling controlled me now—it was as familiar and foreign as ever. I sobbed and wailed. I felt devastated and pathetic. A man approached me and touched my shoulder, lacking the sympathy one would expect given the circumstances. I looked up at him, my eyes red and screaming tears. He made a disgusted face and I fell back into my hands.

“Uh... they said you wanted to talk to me,” he said, rubbing his neck uncomfortably.

I tried to speak. I tried to gather myself. But trying did nothing nothing wouldn't have. How pathetic had I become? How pathetic was I in that moment? A wailing mess of shit crammed in a MacDonald's booth—demanding answers for salvation. On the bright side Jake Larrenberg, the man standing next to me, would likely be too offput to be put off by the questions I'd come to ask him. He stood and stared, as did everyone close enough to hear my cries. Then as I pulled my gaze up the pain drained away. The devastation dissolved and once more I felt nothing—no relief, no absolution. Nothing.

“Yeah,” I replied, dotting away my tears with a napkin. “Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Sure thing. Are you ok?” he asked, dropping into the other side of the booth.

“I'm fine. I don't know what came over me,” I stated, reaching for the shoebox of post-its seated next to me. “Now this is gonna seem a bit odd, so try to bear with me.”

“Ok. What's this about?”

“That's what I'm trying to find out,” I exclaimed, removing the lid from the shoebox and shuffling through my notes. I pulled out key words and names; cleared my throat and mind and dove into it. “Have you ever been in a car accident or know anyone who has?”

“Uh... I've been rear-ended a few times but nothing serious. My ma ran a red light one time and got hit pretty bad,” he answered, making the same confused face everyone did when I interrogated them.

“Was there a child involved?”

“What?”

“A child... a little girl in the car with her or involved in the accident, possibly injured as a result of it?” I inquired, pushing my food aside—making damn sure not to touch that milkshake again.

“No, I don’t think so,” he replied, fidgeting uncomfortably in his seat.

“Have any women in your family ever committed suicide?”

“Excuse me?” he grunted, loosing his sympathy for my emotional display just moments before. “Look, what’s this about? Why are you asking me about my family?”

“Call it peace of mind, but don’t assume it’s anything more,” I stated, having fully returned to my abrupt nature. “Just know that it’s important and it won’t affect your life, outside of the time taken to answer these questions.”

“An ex-girlfriend of mine committed suicide a ways back but no family,” he mumbled after a period spent contemplating whether my need to know was worth his compulsion to leave.

“Did she take your name?”

“No, we broke up.”

“Ok,” I muttered, looking to my box of post-its once more. “Do you know anyone by the name of Annie or Megan Larrenberg?” I asked, holding my breath in anticipation.

“My brother’s fiancé’s named Annie. She’ll be a Larrenberg soon enough,” he exclaimed, becoming more and more aggravated by my inquiries. I exhaled any hope of finding more than another dead end. I’d ask a few more questions, leave for the restroom, and never come back.

“And what’s your brother’s name?”

“Aaron,” he stated, glaring at me.

“He lives in town doesn’t he?” I said, recalling the Aaron Larrenberg listed in the phonebook.

“I think that’s about enough,” Jake grumbled, standing up from the table.

“Just bear with me,” I groaned in an exasperated tone.

“How do I know you’re not out to do me or my family harm? And why should I answer your questions, anyway? Because you were blubbering when I got here?”

“How ‘bout because I asked you to?” I snapped, frustrated that my efforts had gone unabated once more; that my reason to live was proving itself false.

“You listen to me,” he hissed, leaning in nice and close so I could smell his rotten breath. “If I ever see you again, I will beat the mother-fucking life from you,” he growled, holding up his finger and pointing at me—I made a mental note to forget the threat. He paused a moment before storming off to see if I had any piss or vinegar left, but I stayed quiet—I still had his brother to talk to after all, and nobody likes bruised strangers. I stood up and brushed off a few sesame seeds clinging to my pants. I took a final look at the milkshake and contemplated whether I desired the horror I would feel with it, or the numbness I would without. I chose to leave and stepped away from the table... The first step’s everything—the rest echo until the last.

CHAPTER 10

Annie died at 3:43 that morning. Megan had cried herself to sleep an hour before and wouldn't find out until later in the day. I didn't wake her to tell her... even out of consideration or necessity, I didn't wake her... I couldn't... I felt the world cave in on me. I felt my heart stop beating and I was left with nothing. I was nothing.

She couldn't cry anymore and neither could I. Megan sat across from me, spotted with residual tears and snot. The initial blow had begun to subside, and disbelief was assuming control. We didn't look at each other. We didn't touch one another, or even acknowledge that the other existed. All we did was sit in the hospital, too exhausted to realize we needn't be there any longer—trapped in our thoughts of Annie that, though mutual, found a distinct pain in each of us.

“What happened, Megan?” I choked, realizing that I knew nothing more than the outcome. But I needed to know the events that built up to it—what had happened when I was buying the ice cream.

“What?” she whispered after a short pause. She looked through me, her eyes empty.

“What happened?” I repeated, too weak to elaborate.

“What are you talking about?” she sighed, too emotionally distraught to understand anything more than the most basic communications.

“How did it happen?” I asked after a short time considering my words. She pulled her eyes out of oblivion to focus on me. She remained silent. I could see a spike of pain pulse from her heart and make her shudder. She was afraid.

“Annie lost her balloon and chased after it,” she exclaimed, using every last ounce of strength not to lose herself in the memory. I held her gaze for a moment—intense and vulnerable. I had to ask because I had to know. But I already knew—it wasn’t enough to satisfy me—she had to confess.

“Why didn’t you stop her?” I stated, my voice cracking and heart breaking.

“I was on the phone,” she whispered, falling to the side and wailing after she spoke. I watched her fingers curl into a fist. I watched her chin fall and legs pull up to her chest. I watched and did nothing. I tried to see her pain as I did my own. I tried to think of the love I had for her. But trying did nothing nothing wouldn’t have.

CHAPTER 14

...Aaron Larrenberg...

I sat in my piece-of-shit car outside of Aaron Larrenberg's house for the better part of an hour. My hands were glued to the steering wheel and my mind to the strawberry milkshake. It was as intense a feeling as any I'd had before. The way I felt when I held the seashell, at the accident or when I found the woman in my bathtub—feelings the likes of which compelled me to go on—horrible and visceral. The pain, as devastating and unbearable as it was, served as a fleeting release from apathy. It was an unrecognizable reminder of... feeling something more than nothing.

And then, like a freight train hitting me, all I could think of was when it started—when things went wrong and the lifeless way I'd gone through my days no longer sufficed. My wife, Lana, realized that the way I felt for her wasn't enough for her to be happy—that love is mutual, else a curse. I suppose I have her to thank for where I am today—my love for her was the only thing I'd ever known except the misery felt thereafter. I longed to feel it again. But more than that I wanted answers to devastation and question... Why?... Why?... Why?... The day of the accident was the first time I felt anything beyond the love I had for Lana. The first day that I lost everything I thought I had, to see I had nothing of what I thought...

Before the accident I stared at the ground as I walked. I kept my hands in my pockets and my thoughts to myself. The sidewalk was immaculate. The weather was perfect. The people were polite and the air was fresh. Lana was at home waiting for me. My work was out of sight, out of mind. Cars passed to my right as I walked uphill. It was to become an infamous intersection—a long stretch between lights that, during rush hour, people sped through to escape the city. It was rush hour.

I remember looking up out of curiosity, compulsion and a chill creeping through me. It was hard to breath. It was impossible to move. All but a floating pink dot melted away... a balloon... and then a little girl. About five-years-old with shoulder-length dark brown, braided hair... a smile on her face. I stood frozen, blinking hard to try and regain my sight beyond her. She walked cheerily, bobbing the balloon up and down on its string. Then another shape formed out of the darkness—a woman on a cell phone, gazing off into the distance. I watched her intently, a sinking feeling of apprehension and fear washing over me. My heartbeat quickened and I gasped for air. I turned to the little girl once more to see her balloon snap free of the string and float away. She chased after it, running towards me, grabbing the air. Horrified, I was lost in the moment. As she jumped up one last time for the balloon, it bounced off her fingertips and a screech pounded behind her. A car appeared out of nowhere and I screamed.

I ran to her—as hard and fast as I could. But, just as I reached out for her, the darkness faded and my sight returned. The car that had hunted her disappeared, replaced by a thunderous roar of horns. I turned my head quickly to the side to see a herd of cars bearing down the road straight towards me. Brakes howled as cars swerved to the side of me—crashing into one another time and time again. I ducked and fell to the ground, frantically looking for the little girl. I spotted her running down the road, towards the other side. I stretched out my arm to try and grab her, but a rolling car slammed onto the

pavement in front of me. I pulled my arm back, the car just missing my fingers. I peered forward to see the little girl swallowed in a truck's path. I cried out to her—out of pain and horror. My eyes exploded with tears, and I rolled onto my back. The sun glared down on me as I turned to the side to see a dark liquid creep from under a car, visible only by its reflective borders gracing the asphalt.

For a moment it was silent. The chaos around me lay still as people held their breaths, anticipating another crash. The street was quiet—only my wails were heard. I pulled my head up one last time, before I lost consciousness, to see the blurred figure of the woman who had been on the cell phone. She screamed over and over again; her body shook from visceral, gut-wrenching wails. She shrieked the name Annie... and then I fainted. When I woke up I was in the hospital. Three days later charges were pressed... I was assigned to a therapist... My picture was in the paper—it was a nine car pileup; three people had died in the accident, but no little girls...

I dug my hands into the steering wheel, searching deep within myself to feel what I felt that day. But I couldn't, I never could. I turned and looked at the box of post-its, aching to hold the seashell, but decided otherwise. I had to talk with Aaron Larrenberg. I had to know what went wrong in my life—what happened to me, and what continued to happen to me.

I opened the car door and stepped outside. I stood before a two-story, brick house, bordering an empty street. Birds sang from an apple tree in the front yard and I could hear children at a playground in the distance. I felt tired... weak... I trudged up to the front step of the place and stomped my feet on a welcome mat. I checked my watch as I lifted my hand to the door, knocking loudly... 3:43... I heard a rustling from somewhere in the house and waited patiently to be acknowledged. Three fleeting glimpses of past pains endured went by and the door opened.

“Aaron Larrenberg?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow as the man before me lingered behind a half-closed door that concealed him from the waist down.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled, looking me up and down, twice-over. He held a dumbfounded expression as he loosened his grasp of the door; it drifted open gradually to reveal he wasn’t wearing underwear. I raised my hand to just below eye level and subsequently blocked my view of his genitals. “I can’t believe you’re here,” he exclaimed, completely oblivious to his nudity.

“Why and why not?” I said, confused since he addressed me as though we were old friends.

“No, they did... I’m sorry, come in,” he stated, pivoting back and forth, his lower half swinging wildly as he moved. I shook my head as I walked past the clearly crazy brother in the Larrenberg family. He stumbled around the place, frantically searching for either pants, sanity, or a bigger penis. I found my way to a couch and planted myself on the far corner of it. A few moments later, Aaron passed through the room wearing a pair of blue basketball shorts.

“I need to ask you a few questions,” I tried to say, noticing that he hadn’t seen where I sat down, and had taken a seat in the kitchen instead. I scowled and stood up—walking into the kitchen to sit down across from him. “As I was saying, I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Can I get you anything to drink?” he asked, settling in his seat.

“A glass of water,” I sighed, thinking momentarily about how poor I was and whether or not it was wrong to hit this guy up for food.

“Sure thing,” he said, standing up and reaching for the fridge. He fumbled around with its contents for a while and eventually pulled out a couple bottles of beer. He placed one before me and kept the other for himself. I stared out of contempt at him for a second, before deciding that I might as well just drink what he put before me.

At that moment, a grandfather clock chimed in, cutting off my thought process. Aaron took a long swig of beer before setting it down on the far corner of the table. The dirty-yellow of the appliances in his kitchen gave me the creeps. And, for whatever reason, I was consumed with familiar feelings of confusion and fear. Something wasn't right about this...

"You must have a lot of questions," he gleamed, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms out to the table.

"That's what I've been saying," I stated, setting my beer aside as I moved my chair closer to the table.

"Well, we are brothers," he exclaimed, changing the subject and making no sense all at the same time.

"You mean you and Jake?"

"What doesn't make any sense?" he demanded, his mood changing from relaxed to worried.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I questioned, hearing a clicking sound come from the front door.

"Are you ok?" he asked, making a concerned face at first, but changing mid-sentence to a perplexed one.

"I'm fine. You should be concerned about yourself," I muttered, turning as I heard the front door open. A bag of groceries was kicked in, as whoever had arrived home struggled to balance a few more bags. "Who's that?" I asked, turning towards Aaron once more, only to see that he had disappeared. I squinted and bobbed my head from crevice to corner looking for him, but found nothing. Meanwhile, the woman entering through the front had now found herself in the middle of the living room, staring at me as I sat at her kitchen table.

“Hey,” I groaned, unhappy with Aaron’s sudden disappearance. The woman took a startled step back and froze where she stood. Her eyes widened and lip quivered. She said nothing to me, but stared all the same. After a few more moments she opened her mouth wide and screamed.

“Aaron!” she cried, leaning back towards the door so that she could be heard from across the street.

“What?” a man’s voice bellowed from somewhere outside the house. I adjusted myself in my seat uncomfortably, looking at the sides of the kitchen to see if there were any exits to get outside without my knowing. But there weren’t—the only way out was right in front of me and the beers were gone... Suddenly, I realized how awkward the situation was... Aaron Larrenberg had never been there—it was only me playing make-believe.

“Shit,” I exclaimed, as a tall, angry man stepped inside, looking nothing like my imaginary friend from moments before. He gave a rancid look to my unannounced visit, stepping in front of the door incase I tried to run. He was bigger than me and I was trapped.

“Who the fuck are you?” the man, who I assumed the real Aaron Larrenberg, growled.

“Josh,” I whimpered, lacking feeling despite my ensuing beating.

“Why yah in our house, Josh?” Aaron snapped, as the woman moved behind him.

“Look, there’s been a mistake. I just wanted to ask you some questions,” I tried to explain, standing up and lifting my hands to my sides, in a defensive position.

“Annie, call the cops,” Aaron said, turning momentarily to speak with his fiancée.

“Woah!” I cried, trying my best to keep things from getting worse. “I’m sorry to have startled you, I apologize. But...”

“Apologize to the police,” Aaron snapped, cutting me off mid-sentence while slowly creeping towards me. I watched his movements—careful yet pronounced. He was afraid. I looked up to Annie, already well into her discussion with the cops, and panicked. I couldn’t get caught. I had to find answers. Deception was my only option. Fuck.

“Don’t take another step!” I yelled, reaching for my hip, but stopping just before the edge of my jacket. Aaron and Annie froze. He raised his hands to a visible height and she let the receiver fall from her lips. They watched me intently, in case I pulled the gun I’d made them believe I carried. “Hang up the phone!” I demanded, pointing to Annie in the angriest, most intimidating voice I could think to show.

“Calm down, Josh. We don’t want any trouble any more than you do,” Aaron stuttered, losing his hero-pose to my villain move.

“Hang up the phone!” I repeated, my eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. She hesitated and looked at Aaron. He nodded to her and she put it down.

“Josh. I think you should leave,” Aaron stated, lowering his hands out of sight as he slunk towards the exit.

“Stop moving!” I shouted, knowing well that they wouldn’t play along much longer. Then as I advanced towards Aaron, Annie made a move for a nearby drawer. As my focus turned to her, Aaron reached out his arm and grabbed me by the coat—no doubt realizing I was unarmed.

“Motherfucker,” Aaron growled, latching onto my arm well enough to keep me from running. I watched Annie, frantically digging through the drawer as I struggled with Aaron’s grasp. I pulled against him as he attempted to subdue me, and we both fell to the ground. His arms swatted and grabbed at my

clothing—pulling me to the floor. All I could see was the door. All I could think of was escape. Until...

“Freeze!” Annie screeched, pulling out an antique revolver from the drawer she’d been digging through. She smeared it along my eyebrows enough to prove that between the eyes was a sure thing at point-blank. Startled, I began pushing myself backwards with my hands. Aaron had released me and was standing up to take the gun from his wife. We both panted, and I watched as he reached for Annie’s shaking hands. But when he tried to touch the gun, he startled her and she took a step back. In that moment I pushed myself up from the ground and barreled through the two of them. Aaron lifted his arms a final time to try and restrain me, but my momentum overpowered him.

His fists followed my heels as I reached for the door. Annie screamed as I went through them—too much happening too quickly to think. The gun had found itself on the ground by the door; I scrambled for it so no shots would catch up with me after I left. Aaron landed on top of me and started beating every part that showed. I grabbed the gun and pulled it to my stomach as I folded into a defensive ball. As his fists came down on me, and Annie slammed something wooden into my back, I managed to see that the revolver was loaded. Quickly, I aimed for the door, releasing a shot into the air to scare them off. Everyone froze. I breathed hard, looking up to see Annie slink away, clenching her rolling pin. Aaron panted, looking to his wife, concerned with her safety, as she looked to him concerned with his. I scrambled forward, slamming my shoulder into a framed American flag, as I stumbled to my feet. I could hear glass break and as I glanced back to the flag I saw Annie and Aaron tearfully embrace one another, no longer concerned with my presence. I hadn’t hit anyone and as I rushed from the house, carrying the gun with me, I ensured both their safety and mine.

A few blocks further, and one lung down, I stopped to rest. I breathed hard and violently. I clenched my side and leaned against a nearby wall, my head

spinning. What had just happened? If I'd imagined the guy who let me into the house, how did I get in to begin with? How come it seemed as though he was interacting with me, incoherently albeit, but still... The car was parked near the Larrenberg house—I couldn't go back for it. They'd no doubt have called the police to report me. I had to disappear. But... the seashell... everything I'd documented thus far... where I was going and where I'd been—everything was in that car. Fuck.

I glanced from one side of the street to the other, pacing where I stood. The police wouldn't be there yet... The Larrenberg's would still be too frightened to intervene... Which meant the only time to go back was now. I sprinted across the street, realized I was out of breath, and slowed to a brisk walk. I turned an eye to my car in the distance—the shitty, crimson Lincoln that my fate now seemed tied to. I glanced at the Larrenberg house, quiet and still. And then I could see a squad car turn a corner and park before me. I held my breath but kept walking. They wouldn't know who I was yet—I had no time to be patient, but had to act the part all the same. I slunk around the side of the cop car until I was next to the Lincoln. I gave a final glance to two policemen storming the house. Aaron and Annie were visible in the window. I ducked behind the car and slowly crawled in. They didn't see me.

CHAPTER 11

My fingers shook from button to button as I undressed. I kept my eyes on the mirror. The tips of my lips drooped forward, curdling my chin. My eyebrows hung dead above my lifeless eyes. Megan sat on the bed and undressed. Her movements were jagged and clumsy. I pulled sharply on my shirt until it hung free of my waist. I leaned against the bathroom sink, feeling the top of my head hit the mirror. I let out a breath after a long while spent contemplating if I should waste another. I stared vacantly into the sink—hearing Megan sob in the bedroom. I reached slowly forward turning the faucet on, loud enough to drown out her tears.

I'd woken up thinking the day ahead would be worse than those before it. But I realized I couldn't fool myself into believing the worst of it was today, just so I could feel better about tomorrow... Today was the funeral... a time that, for anyone else, was reserved for grief—but was to me no different than any other day. Only on this day, I had friends and family to bear witness to my sorrow—to tell me they love me and how sorry they are. It doesn't change a thing, bring her back, or matter a damn.

Megan sat hunched forward with her head in her hands. I could see her out of the corner of my eye. I turned to close the bathroom door. Her shoulders bobbed up and down as she gasped for air. I felt ill. The faucet echoed a white noise as I inched the door shut, keeping my eyes

on Megan all the while. We hadn't spoken more than a few words to one another for days. And every time I choked a word to mouth, it was lost to the thought of her—of what happened.

A limo had arrived for us in the morning, accompanied by a multitude of grieving friends and family. They brought us food, and scurried about our concerns as though they were their own. But their love was for us, and our loss. And, as I sat, listening to the priest that Megan insisted on, preach to me of life eternal, I realized no one but Megan and I had come for Annie; that the day was no more than a formality. I realized that funerals aren't for mourning, they're for goodbyes. But I wasn't ready to say goodbye, and I resented the occasion. Mourning isn't summed up in a day. It's not a tear or a wail... it's... waking up to remember that you didn't want to wake up. It's having to walk past her closed bedroom door. It's every second gone by without her in my life.

Now she was in the ground... out of my life. And the pain I felt with that confession was such that I knew it a lie. I couldn't believe she was gone. I couldn't... and if ever I did it would mean the end of my life. I grasped the sink tightly, screaming inside. My heart boiled with each beat, and tears burned my face. As I wept I heard Megan collapse on the bed as I did on the sink. And though we lived with one another as we did with the pain—there was no room for three. Only anguish remained.

CHAPTER 12

Today she would have watched cartoons while eating breakfast... pancakes, maybe eggs, waffles if I felt up to burning my hands a few times... I would have read the paper, glancing up every other minute as she cried, 'Look dad!' while pointing to the screen. I'd smile, or laugh, and then we'd start all over again until she wanted to do something else. Megan would be at work already and, to Annie and I both, it would seem she hadn't been there that morning. Megan was at work now, her first day back since the accident.

We would have gone to the park, or the grocery store. Or, if it were raining, we would have stayed inside and played video games. I'd let her win, but I'd make it close so she couldn't tell. She'd ask me questions about things I thought it best she didn't know, and I'd give her everything in the world but the answers. She loved jump rope and didn't seem to mind that I could never get the hang of it—she'd try to teach me, and I'd play dumb so she'd keep trying. She was ticklish and always quick to smile. It was nice to know that even on the days when she was upset, she'd suddenly giggle as though nothing bad had ever happened.

She'd play with her dolls and I'd pretend I was too busy to join in for more than a few minutes. But I'd always peek through her open door and smile as I listened to her adventures. On some days it would be dinner as a family. Megan would come home on time, and we'd kiss 'hello' like happy couples are supposed to. Other days it would just be

Annie and me. Maybe we'd make a sundae like we did when... maybe we'd... maybe... maybe not...

I turned onto my side in bed, having forgotten where I was yet again. The sun was shining. We would have spent the day outside. I let a disgrace of a smile onto my face before giving way to tears. I was alone. I pushed myself out of bed and staggered to the washroom. I found myself before the mirror and stopped, catching sight of a few new stress lines and gray hairs.

Her coat was still hanging by the door. The pictures of us we'd tacked to the fridge with magnets she'd taken from cereal boxes. The things she'd drawn... books she loved... her first word... her first step... day at school... I thought of them all knowing she'd had her last. I returned to bed and pulled the covers over myself. Megan was at work, and I was alone.

I tucked my hand under the pillow and draped my leg over the side of the bed. I twitched my fingers about until I felt the prize. I pulled it from the pillow and slowly opened my palm... Annie's seashell necklace... I caressed it as I did every night, every day... I'd try getting up again tomorrow. Maybe.

CHAPTER 15

“Fuck,” I muttered, pulling the razor from my face to reveal a cut on my chin. I stood draped over a running faucet, in a truck stop men’s room. I’d managed to hack away most of my beard and was working on the finishing touches.

Due to the scene I’d made at the Larrenberg place, it was imperative that I altered my appearance. And it certainly didn’t help my case that I was a fugitive and had been identified by a teenage girl earlier that morning. Something about the whole damn town was pulling me under. But I still hadn’t spoken to the person I needed to. I hadn’t gotten to the bottom of things, just deeper in shit that went wrong.

I leaned forward, feeling the top of my head hit the bathroom mirror. I ripped off a square from the paper towel dispenser and tapped it to the spot of blood on my chin. The next thing on the agenda was the only thing I cared about to begin with: Megan Larrenberg. Finding her, questioning her and with any luck, coming to an understanding about whatever the hell it was I sought. But that might not have anything to do with her. Then again, it might be everything I’d built it up to be.

I pulled my shirt back over my head and wiped my hand along my face, examining the shave. I looked myself over—catching sight of a few new stress lines and gray hairs. I was exhausted and felt more so with every passing moment. My eyebrows hung low and my expression looked as though I were in pain. But I wasn’t—I was the same as always—no feelings. Nothing. I gave

myself a kind of unkind stare as I stood before the mirror searching for answers. But all I could think of was how stupid I was. Of how I'd just broken into a couple's home on the whim of a feeling. And now what? The same thing over and over again... just another stupid mistake I'd have to repeat, to hear the speech about how I won't do it again. But I will—I have to. It's all I have left.

I let out a deep breath and opened the door. I squinted as the sun exploded into the room. As my vision adjusted I could see a phone booth in the distance. I trudged forward, feeling the weight of my body as I willed it forward. My pockets contained quarters enough to make the call, but not much more. Soon I'd be completely broke. Which meant this call had to be every answer I'd ever need... Megan Larrenberg...

I pulled out the crumpled napkin containing my list of phone numbers. I stepped in the booth, plopped a few quarters into the slot and punched digits. The line went dead for a moment before chiming to a ring. I leaned against the side of the booth, exhausted and restless. A few rings later and someone answered.

“Hello?” a man said, probably the one responsible for her engagement ring.

“Is Megan at home?” I asked, wobbling despite the support of the booth.

“No sorry, she already left,” he answered, assuming me a friend.

“Left?”

“Yeah, for the wedding,” he replied, as though I should have known better. I scowled and clenched my teeth. I'd missed my chance.

“Umm... is there any way to get ahold of her?” I inquired, a sudden rush of devastation consuming me.

“Not really... as far as I know she’ll be pretty much incommunicado till a few weeks after the wedding. But I’m only looking after the house, so I couldn’t tell you much of anything.”

“Ok...”

“Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.”

“Uh...” I groaned, turning to deceit one more. “I’m calling because my invitation was lost in the mail and I wanted to get the specifics of when and where from Megan. Would you happen to know that stuff?”

“Actually yeah, I think they framed an invitation. Not really sure why but I can go check for you if you like.”

“That’d be great,” I sighed, struggling to keep my eyes open.

“K, one sec,” he replied, putting down the phone. I breathed through my mouth as I wiped the sweat from my brow. My hands shook and my stomach churned. I felt nothing but weak. “You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Kay. The wedding’s this Saturday at five o’clock.”

“Where is it?”

“The... Saint Agustin Church.”

“And it’s in Seattle, right?” I guessed, trying to pass off my ignorance as though I had a bad memory.

“Uh, no. It’s in Boston,” he answered, confused by how little I seemed to know.

“Fuck,” I grunted, dropping the receiver and stumbling out of the booth. It was hard to see straight but I knew what I had to do all the same. The wedding was in Boston—my worst-case scenario had come true. Boston was where Lana was... it was everything I’d run from; the woman in the bathtub,

the life I'd had... But now Boston was exactly where I needed to be and exactly where I was headed. I didn't have it in me to go on anymore, let alone run any longer. After I'd talked with Megan, I'd turn myself in for whatever it was I had coming.

I fell into the car after a shaky time spent pressed against it praying for composure. I thought as though I should feel worried. No such luck. It didn't matter... Nothing mattered... I was ready for it, whatever 'it' was. I fastened my seatbelt and noted how much gas I had—I'd have to steal more to make it. I turned the ignition and checked my mirrors, heading onto the road again. I groaned as the car gained speed and I melted into the seat, glancing every other second at the box of post-its next to me... the seashell... It had to wait. The only thing I could think about now was making it to Boston... I made a right turn towards the highway, seeing again the dusk and dawn of the town I'd assumed held my answers. Like the sign said, 'Now Leaving Reverie.'

CHAPTER 13

I didn't want to stay in bed—I hated it there. The silence was... it was a window to memory... a relapse of sorrow and devastation anew... but I couldn't go out... I couldn't watch TV or fake resolve... I couldn't do much of anything. And, as much as I hated lying in bed, sobbing and dying over and over again—I didn't have it in me to escape. My purpose was gone and, with it, any hope of a life thereafter... It was overwhelming... I was confused, distraught, hopeless, lonely and surprised—caught in a constant shift from one state of anguish to another. Sometimes I didn't believe she was gone or that this was real... that I'd never see her again... But sure enough, the silence remained—and with it the memories returned.

I heard the front door open—Megan was home from work... she'd told me her colleagues gave their sympathies—that they were supportive and made every effort to be kind and considerate... They didn't mind if she came to work late—if she had to excuse herself from the room, or the day altogether. That she could make it to work at all seemed to baffle them. But I could tell she needed the escape—something to keep her busy and out of the house. Unfortunately, I didn't have the same luxury. I was trapped at home, and all but a few moments of my day were the same... the seconds as I woke up, dazed from a dream of still having Annie in my life... the calls from Megan to check on

me, tell me she loves me and wish me well... and the kiss hello when she'd arrive home, to find me still in bed, all alone.

“Hey,” she whispered, leaning down to the bed to kiss me. I remained still, keeping my eyes open and mouth shut. Her lips felt... different. And as she pulled away, making the same heartbroken expression she always did when I lay silent, I could do nothing but look through her. “I’m gonna make dinner, ok?” she exclaimed, raising her voice mid-sentence to conceal the hurt in her tone. I didn’t reply—as usual—and she slunk away.

I could feel a wet spot on the pillow begin to grow against my cheek. I heard Megan descend the stairs, the taps of her footsteps echoing through the empty house... I could still feel her lips upon me. And as the phone began to ring, startling me enough to blink and return to reality, I wiped my mouth clean. I heard her answer it and sat up, hunching over myself in bed—running through the voices of people I’d heard offering their condolences—it seemed that nothing but sympathy existed in our presence... Sitting up I could see her bedroom door—shut, as though what lay inside could be worse than...

“It’s for you,” Megan said, standing in the doorway, severing my view of Annie’s room. I looked up at her, pausing for a few seconds, unable to speak. She walked steadily forward and gently placed the phone before me on the bed. She gave a slight smile, one that pained her to show as much as it did for me to see. She left a moment later, closing the door for my privacy. I looked down at the phone, curious.

“Yes?” I muttered, clearing my throat.

“Mr. Larrenberg, it’s Dr. Maerd calling from Reverie,” he stated in a grim tone.

“Yes?”

“Well, I’m afraid your mother’s time with us is coming to an end,” he explained, needlessly refreshing my memory as to the only reason why he’d ever need to call. I exhaled loudly and searched within myself for a reaction beyond apathy... My mother had been gone long enough for me to forget she was there at all. And, relative to the pain I felt from losing Annie, the idea of losing my mother seemed... insignificant.

“Oh.”

“As previously discussed upon your submitting her into the program it is your and your brother’s decision as to what happens to her now,” he continued, giving the speech he’d no doubt given hundreds of times before.

“I know,” I exclaimed, sparing myself the contractual details. “When’s the appointment?”

“I recommend it be as soon as possible. A few days from now at most.”

“Have you called, Aaron?” I asked, the memories of our constant disagreement over our mother’s well-being rushing to my mind.

“Yes. He had suggested this Thursday at 3:30,” Maerd answered, tolerant of my poor manners and monosyllabic replies.

“That’s fine. Goodbye,” I stated, dropping the phone on my lap and hanging up.

For a long while I didn’t move... I just sat there, fully expecting to wither into a ball and cry myself unconscious. But I didn’t... my mother was going to die and it didn’t make things any worse than they already were. If anything it was a relief... as horrible a thing to think and feel as that was, it was true. Not because I feared for her well-being as my brother did or because I was never going to see her again, as I’d made

that commitment years ago. But because it gave me something to think about other than Annie.

I lifted my foot and turned it to the side, planting it firmly on the cold hardwood floor. I shuffled across the room, using objects for support. I opened the bedroom door and made my way down the stairs, stopping mid way as I caught eye of Megan. She was crying... she sat in her chair, sprawled out over the kitchen table, clenching her fists... her back fell and rose a foot with every gasp as she moaned and fought for breath... I stood still and watched her from the foot of the stairs—thinking, not feeling. I realized her strength had been for my sake; she was every bit as devastated as I was... but... I felt no sympathy for her. No tragic bond between us on account of our loss, or connection beyond it. As I stood, watching her body shake from her wails, I could identify no feeling except for... resentment... that she should feel as hurt, or tormented as I did. She had no right to... It was her fault to begin with.

CHAPTER 14

“I’m sorry, Aaron,” I told my brother, moments after taking a seat next to him in the waiting room.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, swallowing the longest argument of our life on account of my current misery. He gave me an understanding smile, but I couldn’t return it. He looked away and made some chit-chat complaint about how long the doctor was taking—I didn’t pay much attention to it, rather only to him. To think of the sleepless nights we’d been through... the arguments and the silences. I knew how he felt, and that neither one of us would ever change—it was because of that I was so grateful to him now. But even so, I didn’t want him to change himself out of pity for me... treat me like a child or smile when he’d rather frown. I didn’t know what I wanted—but I had no problem with condemning everything there was.

“Follow me please,” a woman in white announced, standing on the brink of a seemingly endless hallway. Aaron and I both stood up slowly and followed her to the office of Dr. Maerd—the one responsible for our mother’s care. “He’ll be with you in just a moment,” she informed us, closing the door to his office as she left.

“Thanks,” Aaron replied, filling in for my lack of courtesy.

I dropped my ass in a chair and slouched. For whatever reason, ironic as it was, being here made me feel better than staying cooped up

in the house. I'd been committed to dealing with the pain head on, no denial, no daily activities to distract me—but I still needed a break, if only for a moment. Too bad it couldn't have been better news than my mother's critical condition.

“How you been?” Aaron finally asked, no doubt unsure of whether or not I'd prefer for him to act as though nothing had happened.

“Not good,” I mumbled, knowing I couldn't cry in front of him.

“Yeah,” he sighed, trying to think of something we could talk about other than death. He felt awkward and I did too. We'd barely spoken for years, save for critical details shared over fleeting phone calls. And now we were strangers—bound as family, fucked as friends.

“Did he give you the same speech on the phone?” I asked, thinking it important to talk about what would be our shared grief, had I any left to give.

“We pull the cord: she's a potato. We leave it in: she dies... Yeah, I got the speech,” he answered, clearing his throat a few times, as if he couldn't let himself cry in front of me.

“What do you think?” I inquired, following a long pause I spent dwelling on Annie.

“I think it's like she's already dead, so there's no point in keeping her alive,” he stated, in a disgruntled tone—unable to hide his distaste though he kept his opinions well.

“She wouldn't have woken up, Aaron,” I said, skipping to the point. He looked at me sharply, holding his tongue as best he could. But I could see the anger in his eyes—everything I'd heard a hundred times over, over the hundred arguments we'd had. But he kept quiet, out of respect for my fragile condition... only I didn't care. I wanted to fight... All I'd felt, in the days before I found myself with him now, was a

brooding anger... a hurt so deep I'd nothing but screams to cope. It didn't much matter if I felt the way I did because of him, so long as I had reason enough to believe so.

"And you made sure of that," he grunted, fidgeting uncomfortably from the strain of bottling himself up. He'd never been one to keep quiet, particularly if provoked—I'd have my argument and eat it too.

"I made sure she had something more to her life than a feeding tube," I snapped, feeling my blood boil, pulse race, and heart pound—feeling every bit of pain and sorrow shoot to the surface. "Maybe it was worth a hope in hell for you, but you should know there wasn't even that."

"I'm not having this argument again," Aaron said, turning his attention to the prestigious degrees tacked to the walls.

"All it takes is admitting you're wrong once," I stated, aiming to cut through his reservations and push him into a fight.

"You got things your way," he cried, still managing to keep his voice low enough to avoid drawing attention. "We brought her here, never visited, and now we're going to let her die."

"Wake up Aaron," I started to say, as the door behind us opened and Dr. Maerd walked in. He wore a white lab coat, glasses, and a grimace. His hair was whiter than I remembered; his demeanor colder. Aaron and I cut our fight short and he did his best to seem casual. But I couldn't peel the frown from my face—I couldn't shake the anger I felt. It consumed me, and every thought I had was tainted by it.

"Hello," Maerd said, walking to his desk and taking a seat. "Have you made a decision?"

“Yes, we have,” Aaron declared, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. His expression was one of aggravation and sorrow... and... I could see his pain over our mother’s death. But I couldn’t feel it—I couldn’t feel anything but furious... It wasn’t him I held in contempt—he hadn’t taken my daughter from me. “We’re gonna leave her in the program,” he said, now looking solely at me. His eyes bore down on me—conveying how hard it was—and had been—for him to send our mother here. I turned away from him, ashamed, angry, hurt—a complete fucking mess.

“I think you’re making the right choice,” Dr. Maerd told us, leaning over, his crossed arms pressed against his desk. “And, once again, I’m sorry that it’s had to come to this. It’s an unfortunate part of the process.”

“Yeah,” my brother mumbled, swallowing his tears.

“If you’d like, you can see her before she goes,” he suggested, as though witnessing our mother wrapped in tubes would sooth our minds.

“No, that’s ok,” Aaron grumbled, standing up quickly.

It didn’t take much time or effort after that—we signed the paperwork and were on our way. The endless hall gave me a feeling of *deja vue*. The bright white—stylized to combine the hospital and innovative sides of the place gave me a headache. I walked with my head down, dragging my heels... I approached the doors and Aaron peeled away—going his own direction too quickly for me to fall upon his feet and beg forgiveness. I paused before leaving and looked up at the broad ‘*Reverie*’ banner—and in that moment, I felt nothing. The pain and anger melted away and I was left bewildered by apathy.

CHAPTER 16

I sold the Lincoln—not exactly a transaction any more legal than the means of acquiring it in the first place. But I needed the money and couldn’t very well show up to a wedding wearing the shit-drenched, raggedy attire I’d donned over months of searching. Besides, I didn’t need the car anymore... after tonight, who knows what, if anything, I’d ever need again. The wedding was at hand—my first, last, and only hope of questioning Megan Larrenberg. Of finding answers to... the things I needed answers to.

“So, what do you do?” a twenty-something, bubblegum hairdresser asked as she shampooed the layers of grease from my hair.

“You mean when I’m not having psychotic episodes?” I replied, serious, though I knew she’d take it for a joke.

“Whatever you can squeeze in between them, I guess,” she remarked, playing along, though I could tell she didn’t really get it.

“I used to be a low level manager of a company I despised, but lately I’ve taken some time off,” I explained, keeping the details of my escapades in check, as I’d still things to do before I turned myself in.

“That must have been nice,” she exclaimed, naturally assuming time off meant better times.

“Yes and no. My wife left me and I went a little insane—disappeared for a while and resurfaced eleven months later—broke and desolate.”

“Ok,” she muttered, making a face somewhere between confused and disgusted. And, as her fingers massaged my scalp (freeing me of the filth I’d acquired over my time away) I realized I really didn’t give a shit about keeping secrets anymore.

“But, of course, it’s not that simple,” I began, staying in tune with the monotone, expressionless demeanor that, to her, was no doubt creepy as hell. “I woke up after attempting to kill myself to find a dead woman who, I assumed, had committed suicide, but I couldn’t really be sure. Needless to say, I was a little shaken up and only got more so after the police arrived,” I explained, watching her grow increasingly uncomfortable.

“Um...”

“Don’t interrupt,” I stated, starting to like the idea of bearing all to someone outside of consequence. “So, they took me downtown and questioned me, as they’d arrived solely on account of my attempted suicide, and knew nothing of the woman. I played ball and soon enough I was free. But the weird thing is that, when I got home, I started having visions of the woman in the bathtub, who I now know to be one Megan Larrenberg.”

“Uh...”

“Yeah, weird, right?” I exclaimed, adjusting the antique revolver I’d stuffed down my pants. “Anyway, the visions I had related directly to an accident I was involved with previously. You might remember it actually—it was in all the papers, my picture included,” I said, pausing to see if she had the balls to respond. After a short moment of staring at her bewildered face I continued. “It was like a nine-car pile-up... right?... So, the woman, Megan Larrenberg, turns out to be the mother of this kid, Annie—the reason behind the whole accident. And, as far as I can gather, deceased because of it.”

“I’m really not comfortable with...”

“I’m almost finished and I’ll give you a big tip for sitting it out,” I stated, lying so far as to get her to finish the wash without bursting into tears. “So, again, these visions fill in this whole back story to the accident. And I’m totally fucked because of this because, for the first time in my life, I’m capable of feeling things... which I forgot to mention, I’m a total sociopath—completely devoid of emotion. Anyway, I kind of snap because on the one side, these visions give me a glimpse of life that I’ve never had. Sometimes it’s the most wonderful thing in the world, while other times it’s... unbearable... but I digress. The feelings I get are the pros. But the cons are... umm... for the last eleven months I’ve been on a wild goose chase because of one vision. And do you wanna know what that is?”

“No.”

“It’s seeing her again. The woman in the bathtub, Megan Larrenberg. In the vision, I see her again—alive. Which is why I’ve gone through all of this: to try and find her, see her alive again. To know not only that I didn’t murder her, but also to try and understand what’s been happening to me,” I sighed, summing up my past few years, delusions, and complete lack of conversational boundaries. The hairdresser didn’t move. Her eyes were plastered wide and her mouth hung open. After a few moments, her gum rolled out of her mouth and landed in my hair. I waited for her to realize this, but assumed she was too appalled to react.

“Is your gum caught in my hair?” I asked, once more adjusting the revolver that was located a little too close to my crotch for comfort.

“Y... yeah,” she stuttered, pulling out of surprise and realizing her fuck-up.

“Ok... shave it off then—all of it,” I exclaimed, completely indifferent to the way I looked. “And I’ll assume the wash is free now, since you’re going to be keeping the hair.”

CHAPTER 15

I need her to talk, but every word she says makes me mad... I need her to listen, but I can't find the strength to speak or the words to make sense of how I feel... I need her to hold me and leave me the fuck alone... I need to hit and kiss her—hate, love, sweet and bitter... I need to wake up to see her and never lay eyes on her again... I need her to confess and cry a thousand tears, but... I can't forgive her.

“I was thinking it would be a good idea for us to go back into therapy,” Megan suggested, as we sat across from one another, eating dinner at the kitchen table.

“I'm not much up for marriage counseling right now,” I replied, clearing my throat as it had been some time since I last spoke.

“I didn't mean marriage counseling. I was thinking of something else that would help us through this,” she said, sitting upright in her chair, holding her fork as it rested on her plate. I looked up from the mound of peas I'd been slapping around and frowned. I sat hunched over and let my arms rest against the table to hold me up.

“Help us through what?” I muttered, putting a disgruntled and exasperated touch to everything I said.

“The grief,” she exclaimed, doing her best to stay stable—to pick herself up enough to try and lift me.

“What exactly are you proposing?”

“I want things to get better,” she replied, lowering her voice to veil the sorrow in her tone.

“Things don’t get better, Megan.”

“Yes they do,” she stated, giving me a look as though she’d actually convinced herself of it. “As hard as it is, life goes on.”

“Yeah, it does,” I sighed, after a long silence of mental rebuttals. “I still shit, eat, breath, and blink so I can wake up another day to do it again, but beyond that...” I tried to say, thinking of Annie—of the balloon and Megan’s neglect. “No, life doesn’t go on.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but said nothing... It’d been weeks upon months of fleeting conversations and small talk. Every day when she came home from work, she’d seek me out to kiss me hello—she’d learned this from our marriage counselor. But now... now I shuddered to her touch—her lips were sour and I could never kiss back... I felt repulsed—angry with her and myself for the way I was.

“I lost her, too,” she whimpered, keeping her head down and eyes off me. It was as though she had been prompting me for any sign of hope or improvement... any indication that I could still love her. I’d forgotten she knew me too well for me to hide behind cynicism... I didn’t reply.

I felt... I didn’t know who I was anymore. I didn’t know what the life I had was... what it had become. I looked at Megan, holding back the tears for my own sake, and felt nothing but contempt. It boiled inside of me and I screamed and beat her a thousand times a thought, every single second... I hadn’t lost Annie—she was taken from me. And now I was supposed to feel sorry for Megan... hold her as though we could ever love one another again and cry in her arms as she would in mine... no... never again.

“I know... I know how hard this is for you,” Megan stuttered—the dam she’d built, her tears, cracking to my stare. “But it’s hard for me too... I loved Annie so much,” she stated, pausing—focusing her energy on staying stable... keeping it together. “And I know... we’ll never be the same... that it will always hurt. And that you’re angry with me for trying to move on,” she explained, delicately dabbing her tears with her napkin. “But it’s not easy for me. And some days, most days, all I want to do is die and hope to see her again.”

I stared at her—motionless. I could find something to detest in her every word. Not because she’d said anything wrong, or because she didn’t genuinely love and miss Annie. I knew she did. But... she didn’t take responsibility for what she’d done. And her pretending that our pain was mutual... that our agony paralleled one another’s did nothing but insult me. I knew then our marriage was over; that any love that I’d had for her was gone. And though I could see hope in her eyes, I could feel nothing of what I once did, of who I once was... I hate her.

CHAPTER 17

The wedding was over and the reception had begun. My idea of talking to Megan Larrenberg on a day where every single one of her family members and friends would be surrounding her wasn't my best laid plan. But I blended in well enough sporting my swank new suit and glistening bald head. I kept to myself and waited patiently for a time when I'd be able to approach her. The festivities, dancing, dining, getting absolutely pissed drunk, were of no concern to me. I lingered around corners and paced beside the bar, picking up drinks to pass the time. But it still took and seemed like fucking forever.

An archaic couple did the bump on the dance floor while children—either exiled or escaped from their parents—chased one another. A pack of Goodfella wannabes stood huddled together, sucking back cigars. The dining hall, and sheer number of people in attendance, made a pool of anxiety build in my stomach. I was still tired—exhausted, really. Had been for weeks. It was a miracle I hadn't killed myself or someone else on the drive to Boston. But, now that I was here, I couldn't find time to sleep. I was on a mission. Before the wedding, I'd said my goodbyes. I'd grasped the seashell and felt my heart pound—sucking up every last bit of the feeling it gave me. But after tonight... who the fuck knows? Prison, insane asylum... didn't much matter—at least I'd have a place in the world.

Speeches were given, shitty first-time-at-the-mic jokes were made, and polite laughs and claps proceeded. The happily-married couple, too dumb to see it was downhill from here, sipped wine cheerily at the center of a long, white

table. Best man, along with the other chumps on the committee and a brigade of bridesmaids flirted while toasting one another's inebriation. Wait staff hurried about, bringing out upscale microwave dinners plated well enough to pass for gourmet. And still I waited. All the while, my eye on the prize... she was different... but I couldn't be sure. From a distance, I could place her face square over my vision of the bathtub and felt a chill in my blood. But... something wasn't right. The scream of memory didn't fit. My heartbeat was getting faster, and I weaker... I couldn't wait much longer.

They cut the cake and actually fed one another the fucking thing—laughing gaily as though they hadn't just made me sick. But, of course, everyone was too drunk and satiated with free food to give a rat's ass about how tedious the night had become. They kept dancing and smiling, one by one, making their way to the cake to grab a slice. I grumbled at the half-deserted table I'd found to waste my time—finding fleeting amusement in the relation between how stressed I was and how the desserts were making me so... desserts backwards spells stressed... goddamn I was bored. But the bright side was that the cake cutting meant the night was coming to a close.

I made my way to the line after catching a few odd looks from family members likely in-the-know of the guest list. Most other attendees were starting to pass out, or finding a suitable lay for the night. Another hour, and it'd be borderline empty—I could only hope for an opportunity in that span of time. After a short while of line-standing I came before the cake: pre cut slices spread across the table to expedite the assembly line of gluttony. A skanked-out single mother, child at side, stood opposite me at the table—her little brat whining about how he wanted to cut his piece himself. She rolled her eyes and assisted him with the task.

“Jeremy!” the woman shrieked, as he slid his hand down a line of icing on the cake. “Don't touch that!”

Fuck this, I thought. I put down the piece I'd plucked from the bounty, and sneered at the child. I was pissed off and I didn't know or care why. Whatever it was that had happened to make me feel all of a sudden had passed unnoticed—perhaps I was regaining my sanity. Or maybe I'd become so bored that I'd fallen asleep and hadn't noticed. Either way, I didn't have any patience left. I felt my knees shake, stomach churn, and my head throb. I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't wait around when everything I'd looked for stood before me; when every answer to my only question was on the other side of the room. I grabbed an empty plate, keeping my less-than-polite stare fixed on the kid, and slammed my hand into the wedding cake—removing a large fistful of fluffy, sugary goo and threw it on the plate. His mother gave me a horrified look as I approached them.

“Here,” I grunted, dropping the plate before the kid as I walked past them, taking a big lick of frosting off my hand. Then I saw Megan... right in front of me, sitting at the table alone. Her hubby had found his way to the cigar circle and I'd gotten my chance. It was about goddamn time.

I pivoted between dancers, slid around the elderly, and accidentally knocked over a few children. Not long now... almost there... Sweat poured, hairs stood up and my heart quickened. This was it... no more bullshit... find out, fuck off, and consider it solved—answers or not.

Megan Larrenberg... Her profile was slender and beautiful. Her nose was long and fitted with a delicate bump at the tip. Her eyebrows lifted high as they extended gracefully out—plucked, but not too thin or thick—you could tell her appearance was important to her. She had pulled her hair back into a bun, sprouting flowers, and a fine jeweled weave. Every breath I took, move I made, seemed disrespectful. I stood still as long as I could manage—staring at her. The room echoed an eerie silence and I felt nauseous. It was her... I could tell. But... it wasn't. She brought her eyes up to look at me, with no sign of recognition or love. Nothing of what I'd hoped. I had my answer... I'd killed

her—she was gone. And no amount of feeling or investigating would change that. I turned away, ashamed and broken. Next stop, confession. I turned to the exit and pressed my palm on the...

“Josh?” I heard someone say from behind me. I turned, lazily, out of disappointment and actualization unto realization. Lana, my ex-wife, stood before me. Fuck. “What happened to you?” she gasped, her mouth wide open from surprise.

“Why? Do I have cake on my face or something?” I asked, trying for a joke as I felt the life I’d had come back to haunt me... Lana... the only thing I’d ever been sure of was that I loved her. But it wasn’t her anymore—it was Megan I loved now.

“Where have you been!” Lana shrieked, taking my arm and leading me out the exit and away from the crowd. She looked worried, very worried. As though I were a ghost, or had stood on the brink of fucking her life over for good. Then I remembered the vision I’d had of Megan and me at the restaurant; of how she had mentioned Lana.

“How do you know Megan?” I demanded, suddenly interested in seeing Lana.

“I don’t, I’m here with a date,” she replied, unimpressed with my change of conversation.

“That’s bullshit, Lana. How do you know her?” I grunted, feeling a momentary surge of anger before resuming despair.

“I don’t fucking know her, Josh. Now, where have you been for the last year?”

“What the hell do you care?” I grumbled, prying my arm from her hold... if she didn’t know Megan it had to be another Lana... It had to be...

“You’ve been missing for a fucking year, Josh! Of course I care,” she said, content with our location enough to raise her voice to me. “Why did you disappear, what happened to you?”

“What the fuck do you mean, why?” I exclaimed, practically laughing at her. “I wasn’t ready to turn myself in yet. I had shit to do. But now it’s done. So, if you’ll excuse me, I have a life to signoff on.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she asked, pausing momentarily to consider if I’d actually lost my mind... I didn’t interrupt her silence, as her deliberation was worthwhile.

“Don’t play dumb. I don’t have time for it,” I stated, walking forward in an attempt to pass her. She raised her hands up and pushed against me, returning me to my former standing position.

“I’m not playing dumb, I’m actually ignorant. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“It seems a little odd to me that you wouldn’t have heard about it through the grapevine,” I said, slowing down as I was now confused too.

“Heard about what?”

“About the woman I killed. The one the police found in my bathtub,” I exclaimed, as though it were the only obvious answer. Lana froze, her eyes jumping back and forth between mine. Her mouth hung open somewhere between question and horror. She had no idea what I was talking about. “You have to have heard about it.”

“No, Josh. I haven’t. The only thing I’ve heard was that you missed your last scheduled therapy session,” she explained, having become very uncomfortable in my presence. “They called me, looking for you. So I went to your apartment, but you were gone.”

“That would have been the day after I tried to kill myself... the therapy session that is... I left the police station, came home... had a few visions, and then the cops came back and found the body... so I ran.”

“Josh, I was there that day... there were no police, and no body in your bathtub. Nobody at all.”

“Then they must have cleared it up by the time you got there,” I stated, starting to grasp the reality of the situation.

“It would have been a crime scene, Josh. They don’t clear those things up in an afternoon. Let alone allow someone like me to just snoop around the apartment and screw-up evidence,” she said, spelling it out for me.

“You’re mistaken then,” I coughed, feeling my throat tighten up.

“No, Josh. I’m not.”

And then it hit me... and... it all made sense. It should have been obvious, and it would have been if I weren’t crazy. But now, it didn’t matter... nothing mattered... I pushed past Lana and rushed away. I didn’t care to explain my madness or divulge myself beyond escape. She cried out my name, and I turned a corner... I’d never see her again. I’d only one thing I needed to do before I needn’t do anything again—put an end to things, once and for all.

CHAPTER 16

The fight had been long overdue—the tension had become unbearable. And as much as I wanted to destroy Megan with what I thought of her, the love I'd had for her kept me quiet. Things had gotten worse. Much worse. She now deliberately stayed at work to avoid me—didn't call to check up, or kiss me hello. I'd acted as though I didn't want her to, and now resented that she'd stopped. This, or something like it, was inevitable. And, given the circumstances, it would happen time and time again.

My back was to her... I snarled and snapped but kept my eyes hidden. She paced the room, heart-wrenching shrieks of grief and anger chilling my blood. She begged and pleaded, indulged disbelief, and became hysterical. I'd told her it was over—that I didn't love her anymore, and that I was going to stay with my brother. I'd used the day to pack, and now there was nothing left but goodbye.

“Stop it,” I grunted, her hand clenching onto me as I sat stiff on the bed. She curled into a ball, reaching out out of desperation to me. Her eyes swelled with tears, nose plugged, and voice cracked. Her face was red from screaming and her hands were pale from stress.

“We can work through it if you just try,” she whimpered. My eyes focused on the floor, not her. “Why won't you try? Why?” she continued, her shoulders convulsing as she wept. She lifted her hands to her face and fell against the wall. I had no sympathy. I felt nothing.

“No, we can’t,” I stated, my face stern—lacking compassion or any indication that I had ever loved her. “I don’t love you anymore, Megan. And I never will again.”

“That’s not true,” she cried, pulling her hands away from her face. She gave me a bewildered look—appalled that I had forgotten all that we once had. But I hadn’t forgotten—it was taken from me.

“Yes it is,” I insisted, growing frustrated from the flood of emotion... I had to get out... I had to escape.

“Please... things will get better... I know they will,” she whispered, her eyes sinking into her head as she assumed an expression of shock. I didn’t know if she spoke to me or herself. It didn’t matter.

I stood up, raising my eyes to her for the first time that day. She sat, sprawled against the wall, limp as a corpse. Her hazel eyes grew dark—deep—apt... a devastating lifeless void in her soul. I’d said what I needed to. But, as I turned towards the door and stepped away from her, she leapt from the wall and grabbed me—pulling me close to her.

“I love you, I love you! Please don’t leave!” she howled, tightening her grasp of me as I strained to free myself.

“Get off... get off!” I shouted, peeling her arms from me and letting her fall, broken, upon the bed. She gazed up at me, vulnerable and frail—searching for reason.

“Why... why are you leaving?” she muttered, lifting her eyes to mine. I felt my heart break... my soul collapse. I turned to gaze upon Annie’s closed door, and any compassion I had for Megan faded away. It was her fault—I could never love her again... and as I thought it, Megan could see it in me. Horror swelled in her and my pain became clear. She knew I blamed her. She knew why I was leaving; why I would never come back. “You blame me,” she gasped, growing ever weaker as the dispute

continued. I lowered my eyes, so as not to look upon her; in doing so, I gave her the answer. I said nothing.

“It’s not my fault,” she stated, crawling across the bed towards me, and grasping my hand. “It’s not my fault. You know that, don’t you?” she asked, expecting an answer. I said nothing and continued walking. Her hand clenched mine as she refused me my exit. “It’s not my fault!” she shrieked, attempting to pull me towards her. But, as she yelled her innocence over and over again, I could feel the rage I’d swallowed boil inside of me. I could feel everything I’d kept buried devour my heart and shred my insides. I turned sharply to Megan, pleading at my side, and lunged upon her, grabbing her by the neck—screaming hollow howls of pain between deafening roars of anger. I hated her.

“It’s your fault!” I raged, tightening my grasp of her throat, pulling her close as tears exploded from my eyes. “You killed her! You killed her!” I screamed, my face vicious. I clenched my teeth together, hissing, as I shook and shook her... Soon after, my strength died and I released her, gagging and crying for breath. I fell upon the side of the bed and wept, as did she—husband and wife... never again. I stood up and ran. I couldn’t be near her... I couldn’t bear the pain—I left her alone and fled the house.

CHAPTER 18

An elderly woman took forever to get on the bus. She stumbled over things, needed help from, and spoke to, other people. She had to be real—everything else had changed because of her... or... maybe not... What if the next time I blinked I snapped back to reality without even noticing. What if everything converged together and I had no way to tell when one delusion stopped and the next began? What if there was no ‘what if’ about it? What could I do now? Knowing everything I’d sought didn’t exist. That none of it was real... not a motherfucking bit of it...

I’d called the cops—a sort of random inquiry as to the history of my last apartment, claiming I’d heard a murder had taken place there. Nothing... nothing at all. Lana was right. I am crazy. The visions, or whatever they were, were entirely manifest. Megan Larrenberg was imagined; her little girl and the story I’d built were nothing but lies I’d convinced myself of to try and explain my psychosis. But now I had my explanation, and it was a good one too: reality... only... it didn’t bother me. I recognized the severity of the situation but, as always, could feel nothing of what I should. Nothing of what I once did.

A middle-aged woman wearing thick bifocals and a dark blue golf shirt fidgeted before me. Was she real? Was this another hallucination? Another mirage tacked up to wet my appetite for answers to questions formed of mirages themselves? Fuck if I know. Reality isn’t supposed to have layers. If I see something pop out of thin air, I’m not supposed to believe it. Lana was right... I was crazy. I am crazy... Reverie.

“Excuse me,” the woman grunted, giving me a foul look as I repeatedly poked her in the arm—trying to determine if she existed. I looked up at her, and gave a slight smile. She stood up and moved to a different part of the bus.

I leaned back in my chair and slapped my hands to my face. I’d untucked my shirt and discarded my bowtie... Megan Larrenberg... it was her. The face was the same but... I wasn’t... why was I feeling that? Why, all of a sudden, did I feel love for her? A residual chill of infatuation-turned-obsession... and why? Why? Why did I feel she needed to reciprocate? Why did my stomach churn when I looked at her? I’m sorry Megan... I’m so sorry.

I didn’t lose her—she was taken from me... A man and a woman in their early twenties stood up to leave the bus, severing my view of Annie’s room... Just because thoughts are your own doesn’t mean you understand them... Maybe I was crazy and this was just the beginning... I was losing grip of the lies. I could feel them crumbling around me—showing me how little I had left. I didn’t want to live anymore.

I was off the bus now—don’t remember getting off, don’t know why I did. The antique revolver I had carried in my pants fell to the ground near my hand, and I reached for it. Holding it, I could see the only answer left. But even with it, I still had questions... Going out with a bang wasn’t a problem; losing my mind was a sure thing. I couldn’t turn away from who I’d become—Megan Larrenberg... Annie... the accident...the seashell, Reverie, and the bathtub... I’d lost my mind. I knew it. I could feel my body reject my thoughts... felt it shudder and wheeze as I poisoned it with my delusion... So much I didn’t understand—no way I’d stick around to find out.

CHAPTER 17

I felt like I'd swallowed an anvil. That kind of pull-to-the-ground sickness when you've just destroyed yourself and the one you love... numbing at first. It crept up on me. As I left the house... as I climbed in the car... as I sat, watching the road pass. I thought only of Megan; that I had made a mistake... there was no going back—not because of what I'd done, but because of who I'd become.

“Back in the old room,” Aaron commented, opening the door to my childhood bedroom. I slouched beside him, gripping two suitcases that contained everything I'd need to never see Megan again.

“Yeah,” I sighed, moving past him and into the room. I scanned it, surprised with how little Aaron had changed it. He had left many of my old things out or, perhaps, had dug them out of boxes to comfort me upon my return.

The wind caught the tail of a curtain and flipped it in the air. I watched a large, orange cat just outside the house, meowing for attention. I kept the lamp off, examining the room and its contents by the flood of light from the hall. Aaron stood by the door, motionless. He said nothing. I turned, still clenching my suitcases, to look at him. He mustered a smile—concerned and considerate, despite my earlier behavior at Reverie.

“Thank you, Aaron,” I stated, following a brief silence. He grinned and stepped away, pausing before he closed the door.

“That’s what family’s for,” he exclaimed, drawing the door shut and leaving me in the dark. I stood still for a moment, looking out the window to the streetlight below. Silence.

I placed my suitcases on the floor and took a seat on the bed. I folded my hands upon one another and leaned over my knees for support... I’d left Megan... she was alone. My heart pounded sickening beats in my chest, and guilt riddled my soul... did I still love her? I was blinded by hatred, but still I wondered if I could ever get it back... Annie... everything about my life before the accident—the good and the bad. I’d do, and endure, anything to have that again... anything.

I heard Aaron walk along the creaking floor to his bedroom. I glanced to my side at the pillow against my headboard. I wouldn’t be able to sleep and the silence would drive me mad if I were to try. For the night, at least, I—like my soon-to-be-deceased mother—would be stuck in Reverie. I’d sent her there... I’d killed her. Aaron knew what would happen and he let me do it. Maybe he knew it was the right thing to do, even if he hated me for it... even if he hated himself for it... Megan...

I regretted it... seeing her face as I squeezed her throat. Her eyes swollen with tears... a sorrowful remorse—regret—requiem. Her mouth opening as she gasped for air, looking to me for help as I screamed and shook her... I hate that I love her... that I’ve left her... but I couldn’t stay. I couldn’t do anything. And for whatever stupid reason, I’d actually believed that leaving would fix things.

I stopped and thought of it... of myself... of the posters on the walls, the toys in the drawers... my mother... Megan, Annie, and Reverie... I clenched my stomach, suddenly feeling ill... I’d left her behind when she needed me most; when I needed her most... But it

wasn't to make things better, it was to hurt her the way she had me. I wanted to see her suffer as I did... I still loved her.

I found my way downstairs, stumbling from room to room without purpose or destination. I thought relentlessly... Megan... I came to rest before the broken frame casing an American flag... my earliest memory was that flag... of my mother receiving it... knowing she had lost her husband, but still strong enough to raise Aaron and me—knowing that the loss of one love didn't warrant abandoning another. It must have killed her... if only I were as strong... Annie.

I exhaled loudly, rolling my eyes to dry them of tears-to-be. I scanned the kitchen, catching Aaron's reflection in a window—but, at that moment, a grandfather clock chimed in, cutting my thought process off. Aaron took a long swig of beer before setting it down on the far corner of the table. The dirty-yellow of the appliances in his kitchen gave me the creeps. And, for whatever reason, I was consumed with familiar feelings of confusion and fear... something wasn't right about this.

What now? What would Megan, or myself for that matter, have or do now? We were nothing... we'd lost everything. And, in the wake of tragedy, I'd spit upon all that was left of an already broken home. I'd deserted and disgraced the only one foolish enough to love me. I'd made the wrong choice—I owed Megan more than this. It wasn't her fault... it wasn't her fault.

The minutes that followed, my revelation of mistakes made and remedies unknown, were stop motion. Every movement triggered a pain in remembering Annie, that demanded me move to save Megan... It wasn't her fault... I grabbed Aaron's set of keys to his shitty, old Lincoln and walked out the door—acting on impulse and sorrow, out of remorse and hope. I needed to see her again—I needed to cry in her arms, to hate and love her. She knew how much I despised her—she'd need to hear the

rest of it... that somewhere, in the mess of my delirium, I still cared for her... that the pain I felt then was born of loving her, of losing Annie. But part of love is knowing the pain of losing what you love—and knowing that it was worth it.

I slid into the driver's seat and jammed the key into the ignition. I glanced at a question mark drawn on the dashboard of the car—Aaron's idea of philosophy. He'd understand why I needed to leave, and I counted on that as I pulled out of the driveway to rush home to Megan. The red Lincoln sped down the highway, my mind far ahead of it. I didn't want to see her—I needed to. This was bigger than me, this was us... things could get better. I love you Megan.

CHAPTER 18

The front door was unlocked and every visible light in the house was off. Annie's coat still hung by the door—I could never bring myself to put it away. The rooms were indistinct from the night; cold, dark, quiet. My heart was in my throat, and I had only Megan to save me. I stepped slowly from room to room—checking the kitchen, living room and, eventually, every other nook downstairs. She'd likely be in bed—too devastated and hurt to survive anywhere else. That I had managed to make it to Aaron's house baffled me. That I had placed everything on Megan's shoulders tormented me... as did the fact that our marriage had come to this... that our lives had broken so far as to break us. Silence.

I ascended the steps, clutching the railing for support. The lights were off. I turned at the top of the stairs to see Annie's closed bedroom door. I hesitated, but opened it all the same. Nothing had changed. The toys, books, posters, movies, and art were all strewn across her room—the eerie silence and still room were a testament to our daughter's death. Megan wasn't here either, and I began to wonder if she were home at all... if she'd gone looking for me, as I had for her.

I glanced in to our bedroom, the lights off. She wasn't on the bed and, as I traced its border, I saw no sign of her anywhere. I frowned as my picture of our tearful reunion proved itself a fantasy. She was gone and I was alone. I fell back against our bed, curling my knees as I came to lie upon it. I draped my arms to the sides and breathed deeply. I'd wait

for her to come back—I'd wait as long as it took to tell her how sorry I was... how much I loved her... how it wasn't her fault.

I lay still. My breaths were deep and controlled. A familiar feeling of angst and concern crept through me as I noticed a red flicker of light on the ceiling. I turned towards the bathroom where it seemed to originate, and stood up. The glass door was barely open, and there appeared to be candlelight inside. I walked towards the door, calling out Megan's name, but there was no reply. I stretched my hand out, pressing my palm on the glass door instead of the knob. A flare from the candle caught my eye as I pushed the door open, revealing an infinite regress of faded handprints hidden in the glass.

The bathroom was black, save for one lit candle resting on the sink. By its light I could see the shadow of a figure in the bathtub. The air was damp and the floor was wet. My hairs stood on end, and my heart sank. I felt a rush of devastation... a pain so deep it seemed it had always been, though I'd never known till now. I said Megan's name one more time, unanswered, before I turned on the lights. Clear light spread wide, but the room was red... nothing but white and red... the horror that had been in seeing Annie trapped under the car, helpless and alone—so, too, it was in seeing Megan.

The floor was soaked in water and blood. As I forcibly pulled my gaze up, it came to rest upon a pale arm, dangling from the side of the bathtub. It was Megan. For a moment, I was still. The shock of seeing her white figure, motionless in a pool... it overwhelmed me. But then I came back to reality; pulled myself enough from reverie to comprehend what was before me. I rushed across the room, slipped on the bloody floor, and fell to the ground. I pulled myself forward on my knees until I came to rest by her side.

“Megan!” I shouted, as I reached up and grabbed her arm. It was cold. “Megan!” I repeated, looking at her frozen face for any sign of life. But there was none... I love you Megan.

I leaned forward and shook her, her body knocking against the back of the tub. Her naked chest didn't move, and I realized she'd stopped breathing... she was dead... I felt an anchor in my chest pulling me to the floor. Shock released me to panic's grasp. She was dead... she was dead... her naked figure seemed to hover in the water. I leaned against the side of the tub, my eyes falling upon her forearm, dangling over the side. Her wrist was slashed deep. Long, large cuts ran up and down her forearm... it was suicide... It seemed that she used every last bit of life in her to kill herself... Tears streamed down my face, and I felt a bizarre numbness suitable for a lifetime of torment. I looked at my feet to see them silhouetted with blood. This was surreal—impossible. How could she? How could I?

I turned once more to look at Megan. She was naked and had sunk far enough into the tub to be almost completely submerged in the crimson water. She was pale... her eyes were closed, and her face had sunken to a solemn, heartbroken expression. The arm that lay over the side of the tub had stopped bleeding—only cold drops of blood clung to her now-empty veins. She was perfectly still—no breath, no heartbeat, dead. I... tried to think... I tried to come up with what it was I was supposed to do... but I couldn't... I... I couldn't... I was... already dead.

I tried one final time to wake her... to raise any life left in her... but, as I sank my arms into the water to try and lift her, my tears weakened me too much to continue. I collapsed, hunched over the tub, weeping by her side. My arm drifted down in the bloody water until it came to rest upon her hand—holding something. I curled Megan's fingers apart, releasing what appeared to be a small stone from her grasp.

I stared into the opaque, bloody water and slowly pulled my hand out. As the liquid rushed off my arm I unwrapped my fingers to reveal a white seashell resting in my palm—the seashell from Annie’s necklace.

My head fell to touch my chest and I exhaled all the breath in my body. I turned my eyes slowly to the side as I noticed a smudge of green, in the corner of the room. A post-it... a suicide note... saying no more than ‘I’m sorry, Josh.’ I plucked it from the ground, trembling, and released it a moment later. It drifted to the floor and landed in a puddle of blood. The writing on it faded in the liquid, leaving only one word: Josh... my name.

Time passed—of that I’m sure. But nothing else can I say for certain. Somehow I managed to get up... somehow I managed to make it to the door... and, somehow, I left the washroom. I found myself in our bedroom, in our house. Where I had lost not only my daughter, but my wife as well. The room was filled with reminders, screaming to me of mistakes made. I was all that remained, but for reasons unknown. I’d no faith to justify my existence, or excuse my losses... I was nothing. I am nothing.

I had gone from uncontrollable tears of shock to visceral, gut-wrenching wails. Nothing mattered—not a goddamn thing. I stumbled to the wall, hugging my sides, and collapsed. But something about how I was feeling didn’t fit with what was happening. It was overtly horrible and yet I could feel a cool sensation in the back of my mind as though I knew more—as though I’d expected what had happened. I collapsed on the floor, gasping as I sobbed and swallowed. The ceiling and walls were peeled away by the flood of tears.

I lay on the ground... a broken, sniveling mess. I dreamt of what I’d say to her if she woke up—I knew she never would. Still, I practiced. Still lived, thought, and breathed as I had every day before. Only now

there was no purpose, no reason, or cause—only devastation and question... Why?... Why?... Why?

CHAPTER 19

I remember the police arriving, but can recall little else of their stay. Deep, thunderous poundings had bellowed from my front door—I hadn't remembered to unlock it for the police, as I didn't remember calling. They assured me I had—though I'd been tearful, distraught, and utterly incoherent. I can't imagine why I would have called, for what good would they do? The only thing I remember of the hours after finding Megan are the moments when I was taken from her.

I had been set aside—in a room far away. They kept me company, and even brought in someone special to try and console me—a therapist, as best I could tell. But I'd no trust in anything I thought or said, beyond what I'd done wrong. That which had ruined me and all those I loved... I was in shock... I was... already dead. But they kept me company... they kept talking to me though I'd nothing to say.

“Your brother's been called, he should be here shortly,” the therapist told me in the warmest voice he could manage. I didn't respond. That I was trapped in a room with a professional ‘rent-a-consolation’ who was, no doubt, lifted from another tragedy was enough for me to despise therapists for all eternity. I had nothing to say to him.

I was trapped in mental anguish—desolation and disbelief. And though I'd nothing left in me but pain, I knew the loss had yet to fully dawn on me... Megan... the thought of never seeing her again... of never holding, kissing, talking... Megan... all I could think of was the past and

how it was supposed to repeat itself. Of how I was supposed to see and love Megan again. But now... nothing. My thoughts lingered on what we'd had...

I still remember her expression when she figured out which rube in the crowd was the one she'd be having dinner with. A mutual friend of ours, Lana, had set us up on a blind date... I don't think I'd ever been so happy and relieved to see her as I was for the first time. She wore a red evening gown—spaghetti straps, open back, and revealing enough to affirm me of her beauty while, at the same time, teasing me with it. I remember her checking me out as I approached her table. And I remember her smiling as I came to stand before her... the first time we met.

“Josh, right?” she exclaimed, her voice swaying somewhat—as though she were nervous. I remember feeling awkward in my suit, worried that she'd see me for the fraud I was.

“Megan, right?” I replied, taken aback by the scenery. The color scheme was a baby blue overtone to an eggshell base. Fine china, tall pillars, open space, and packed seating. Mellow jazz played in the background and our waiter delivered a bottle of red wine to accompany Megan's already-poured glass. I took a seat, conscious of every movement, for just looking at Megan made me weak... it felt like we'd met before... like we were old friends or lovers.

“It's nice to meet you,” she stated, extending her hand to shake mine. I flinched momentarily, recalling the gashes upon her arms—pulling out of memory for the horrors of late... no... not yet...

“It's nice to meet you too,” I mumbled, losing my voice to anxiety. I remember thinking that I had to pull it together; I had to be

charming and confident long enough to, at least, get a second date. She seemed entertained by my demeanor. Her lips peeled apart and her cheeks rose. I stared at her teeth, fixated on her beauty... I felt love, I felt hope... I saw a future here. That notion, which seemed stupid upon our first meeting, became destiny upon our union.

“So... Lana didn’t really tell me much about you other than what you do,” she said, taking a whisper-sip of her wine and adjusting her place in her seat... she was anxious too. And, for whatever reason that came as a relief to me and I was able to relax.

“Given that I’m an afterthought to my employers, what I do probably isn’t the best piece of info to go by,” I exclaimed, my response falling somewhere in the realm of clever, but exceedingly wordy.

“Well, what’s the rest?” she answered playfully.

“The rest?” I blurted out, too busy examining what I’d just said to come up with something new. “Well... I’m the second child. I grew up just outside of Boston and still lived at home ‘till just last year. I’m presently working as a low-level manager, as Lana informed you, but I’ll spare you any further details since they’d no doubt bore both of us,” I described, watching her listen to me. She stared at me, nodding her head and smiling every so often. I felt anxious; I felt my heartbeat quicken and my mouth go dry. I felt worried about what she thought, concerned about the progress of the conversation, and fixated on the mild amount of cleavage she showed that I insisted on keeping my eyes off.

“What I’d actually like to do is go to school and get into philosophy. But something tells me that if I did, I’d probably have to move back in with my mother,” I finished, sticking to the first-name-basis-details before I’d get to the good stuff.

“I guess in the end, you have the beginning,” she stated, smiling though I’d my suspicions that it was forced. I was being boring... I had to pull out all the stops while still being myself. I remember it all... the first time we met... I took another look around the room but stopped as I came to look upon my reflection—I was younger and had a different haircut. I looked... happy. I looked...

“Josh?” the therapist said, moving my arm that I was using to hide my face. I sat hunched over on the floor... Megan... I want to see her again... I want to be where we were... when we first met.

I didn’t respond to the therapist. He said something else to me, no doubt a futile attempt to console me, and I returned to my former position. The pain flowed through me clearly now—touching on hatred, despair, sorrow, and remorse. There was no coming back from this... there was no resolution, short of an ending. I’d no reason to linger, or go on living for that matter. I wanted to die.

Time passed unnoticed and, soon enough I was in Aaron’s red Lincoln on the way back to his house. He drove, while I sat in the front seat. He tried to speak to me and, every so often, I heard him. But I couldn’t respond. She was dead... Megan... I looked down at the seashell from Annie’s necklace, resting in the center of my palm. For some reason, doing so comforted me. It would be over soon and I would be with them wherever they were. I felt a cool sensation in the back of my mind, as though I’d done this before... as though I’d do it again and, in doing so, would see them again... see her again... Megan... live the life we’d had, fall in love, bring Annie into the world and be happy forever. I can see it. This isn’t a cry for help—it’s a suicide.

Aaron helped me inside. He practically had to carry me in... we trudged, together, towards the archaic door of our childhood home. His

arm wrapped around me as my feet dragged on the sidewalk. He was a good brother and a better person than me—I loved him, and was sorry and ashamed for what I'd have to do. He fidgeted with his keys as my head dangled by the door. I came to realize that I'd been crying but, until now, had been completely ignorant of it. I noticed that Aaron's shoulder was wet as he helped me to a seat in the foyer.

“I'll be right back, ok?” he stated, lifting my chin and forcing me to look at him. He looked scared. He slouched forward and breathed heavily. I'd miss him.

Aaron walked quickly away, leaving me alone. Silence. I drew my head slowly up until my eyes came to rest upon an American flag gracing the wall, with a variance of color beyond the ugly decor of the house. But it wasn't the flag I cared to see, it was the drawer in the room behind it. I looked to my side to check if Aaron were on his way back. Nothing. I stood up and walked shakily towards the drawer, opened it, and dug through the contents as quietly as I could manage. After a few moments I found my prize; an antique revolver that had belonged to our father. I checked if it were loaded and stuffed it in my pocket before Aaron returned. As I took my seat once more, I heard him approach.

“Ok, lets get you upstairs,” he suggested, trying to be supportive not unnecessarily positive... I'm sorry Aaron... I have to.

He carried me upstairs, stopping every once in a while to assist me as I collapsed. I was gone—there was nothing left but the will to die... Megan, Annie... we reached the top of the stairs and Aaron opened my old bedroom door. He helped me onto the bed, taking a seat in the chair next to me. I managed to sit upright, keeping my elbows on my knees for support.

“Did you want anything to drink or eat?” he asked, searching the silence for futile words of compassion.

“I,” I tried to say, losing my voice mid sentence. “I need to be alone,” I finally muttered, looking up at him. His heart broke to my words and his head fell to his chest.

“Sure thing,” he replied, standing up and walking to the door. He grasped the golden handle and pulled it along side him as he exited.

“Aaron,” I gasped, taking hold of our last moment together.

“Yeah?” he replied, tears billowing in the corner of his eyes.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” he answered, following a short pause to our first mention of feelings beyond those allowed us as brothers. He closed the door shortly afterwards and walked downstairs. He didn’t need to say the obligatory ‘if you need anything’—Aaron had always been good that way. He knew that I knew and, as he left and I pulled out the gun I wondered if he suspected what I’d do. If he knew that as much as I cared for him I couldn’t stay for him... not after the loss.

I lay on the bed, flat on my side, and looked out the window. And then, somewhere in the distance, I could see... Megan, Annie, myself... living happily again—together. I could see everything of the life we’d had... we moved into our new house... we went to the zoo... I stayed at home with Annie and finger painted... I could see the love in Megan’s eyes when she stopped to watch us... I could see how much we had, now that it was gone... I looked down at my palm, clenching the seashell, and sobbed. I took one final breath and brought the antique revolver to my temple. I pulled the trigger... Reverie.

CHAPTER 19

Seashell in my left hand, gun in my right. I had to work to keep my mind clear. To stay focused. Because, for whatever reason, I could feel everything now—it flooded over me and I drowned in sorrow, in love... in all that the visions had shown me... I saw my dreams unfold, before my eyes, a nightmare. I told myself time and time again that ‘tonight it ends.’ I couldn’t do it any longer. I couldn’t question and I wouldn’t go through the rest of my days without answers. This wasn’t a cry for help—it was a suicide.

“Excuse me?” the radio shrunk coughed, as I damned him with confession of my dilemma. The speakerphone was before me as I sat in my old office building. I’d held onto the key—never expecting I’d need it for this.

“I said, if you take me off the air, or censor any part of what I say, I’ll kill myself,” I repeated for the few listeners still awake at this hour. I glanced down at the antique revolver resting in my palm and lifted it to the mouthpiece, calking it for good measure.

“I’m...”

“I want to talk, Allen,” I stated, addressing him by his first name that he had announced earlier in the program.

I’d heard him... Allen... as I stumbled the streets. He echoed from a parked car’s radio... calling to me—something strange, something familiar. Pumping me full of emotion; leaving me wanting more. He made me feel

confused, distraught... he made me feel, and that was enough. I had to call him. I had to find out the same way I had been for the last year... by chasing my feelings... but now it was too much. It all blurred together... the feelings, the visions... I couldn't think straight... I didn't know who I was... I don't know who I am. No time for answers when you've made up your mind.

"Allen... I'm having something of a bad day," I explained, feeling the tears back up. My eyes wandered the room, catching a reflection of my wife in the corner window, dead in a bathtub. Blood poured from her wrists as she slowly came to rest—she was silent now... poof, it's gone. "Which wouldn't bother me all that much if, at least once, I had a good day."

"I'm sure..."

"Allen shut up. You don't know what's wrong, so you can't tell me if I am," I snapped, recalling my distaste for therapists. "I'm not calling on behalf of a happy ending. I don't want to hear that everything will be alright. So you don't have to make me feel better, or do anything more than just sit and listen, ok?"

"Ok, Josh," he stated, a commotion coming from his end of the line. They'd try to find me, they'd do anything to save me. Cops, firemen, ambulances—whatever's closest. I was a desperate man now, someone to be pitied and feared. But, despite my demands of Allen, I'd nothing left in me, but a bullet to be. Most suicides aren't such a surprise when you have the back story to them. I would be no exception.

My former computer keyboard melted and morphed to the shape and color of a clean-pressed American flag... like the day Lana left me... like the one on Aaron Larrenberg's wall... like... the first night I met Megan. My heartbeat was growing faster. I was losing my strength. My hands were dry and a cold sweat poured over me. I glanced up at the clock; frozen at 3:43.

"Allen... I don't know what's real, because I see things that aren't. And the problem with that is I have no way to tell if my alleged visions are reality, or

if my perception of reality is merely a vision. It used to be I thought myself gifted... that I could see into someone else's life for good reason... to save them from the horrors I saw," I whispered, my eyes growing dim as their lids closed to veil them. "But now, maybe... maybe none of it was real... but I don't believe that. Because the visions made me feel alive—they made me feel, Allen. Love, hate, joy, sorrow... everything. So, to me, the visions are real... they have to be. Because I don't feel anything without them. I don't have a life or purpose without them, Allen. I am nothing without them," I stuttered, my body beginning to shake. I was afraid now. I was losing control of my body and had long-forgotten my mind. The room was filled with... my mind filled the room.

A goldfish appeared in the water cooler, swimming laps before the glass cracked and poured him onto the carpet. A little girl laughed and played in a park, her seashell necklace dangling as she swung on the monkey bars. I made love to my wife, Megan, on our honeymoon... so much before us—we would have it all... The ceiling filled with pink balloons, bumping against one another, trying to escape. A red Lincoln sped down the highway... I fought with my brother Aaron... I picked up the phone to hear my mother would die... I'd killed her; I'd sent her to Reverie to rot... I grabbed Megan by the throat and screamed for the life I'd lost... I woke up to see it start anew.

"I lost my little girl, Allen," I cried, confessing a life I now swore my own. "I was there when she died and there was nothing I could do to save her... I just want to see her again; to hold her and tell her I love her. That's all I want... something so simple, I can't even have... it's not fair, Allen," I blubbered, falling forward onto my desk—too weak to stay seated upright. "I blamed my wife and now she's dead too... because of me... and there's nothing I can do to take it back... I'm alone... I'm trapped... I love them so much... I'm sorry Megan! I'm sorry Annie!" I screamed, collapsing on the floor as I

flailed about, delirious from the swell of visions and emotion—everything I'd ever felt or seen, all at once tearing my brain in half.

“Josh? Are you there?” Allen cried.

We moved into our new house... we went to the zoo... I stayed at home with Annie and finger-painted... I could see the love in Megan's eyes when she stopped to watch us... I could see how much we had, now that it was gone... it has to be real... it has to be... I want that life... I need that life. To feel love that belongs to me. To hold people I care about... need and be needed... I am Josh Larrenberg... I have these things... I haven't lost them... love is knowing the pain of losing what you love—and knowing that it was worth it... in the end, you have the beginning.

“Any minute now...” Allen's voice bellowed inside my head, echoing from a far off place. “God, I hate supervising this...”

“Allen! I'm sorry... please know that I'm sorry!” I yelled, my heart beating out of my chest. “I just want another chance! I love them so much—they can't be gone! I see her again! I know I do!” I shrieked, thinking of Megan; of the vision of us in the restaurant; of how I'll see her alive again, one day.

“Record the time of death, 3:43...” Allen's voice exclaimed, piercing my brain—sending shooting pains through my entire body. I opened my mouth and screamed as loudly as I could. My mind was gone—I was already dead. I flopped on the floor, pulling the antique revolver to my temple. I pulled the trigger... Reverie.

CHAPTER 20

It was black at first. Quiet. **The room was still; nothing moved but my quivering lip. I felt faint—empty—consumed with grief. In the distance I could hear...** a heart beat... It was loud. Like the exaggerated pitch you get from one of those machines that registers it as a series of spikes... an ECG... **I felt groggy, as though I'd been asleep...** but then I opened my eyes and... everyone was staring at me and I didn't know why, let alone who everyone was... where am I?

“Why are his eyes open?” a man in a white lab coat exclaimed as I drew my focus upon him. **The black that had previously drowned my sight faded, and the room became clear.** Everything was white and there were lots of people in the room, **none of whom looked happy to be there.** Some were wearing hospital jackets while others were strapped into beds with tubes running in and out of them.

Other beds contained patients that were connected to life-support and elevated to a standing position. Straps ran along the tables supporting them as they stood, asleep. My eyes were blurry and, as I attempted to raise my arm to rub them, I noticed that I was strapped to a table as well... I felt groggy and disoriented... I felt... I looked to my side to see an ECG beeping in sync with my heart—loud pronounced amplifications of my heartbeat... Where am I?

Everything was white, the people looked either miserable or injured and, as best I could tell, nobody wanted to be there—I was in a

hospital. **Only I didn't remember how I'd gotten there or why I'd need to be there... oh right... I killed myself... or... I'd tried to, anyway.** Obviously it didn't work out the way I'd planned. I must have survived the bullet and been nursed back to health here. But how long had I been asleep? How much irreversible damage had my attempted suicide caused? I took a deep breath and held it... I felt... **numb...** the visions were gone... I felt... confused and nothing more. I wasn't apathetic the way I usually felt, I was... normal—I think. **I tried to move my hands once more, noticing that as I did so, the two people standing before me stepped away in shock.**

“Why is he moving?” cried one of the men wearing a lab coat. **His eyes were open-wide and he appeared more than a little off-put by me.** In fact, he was downright afraid of me and as my eyes came back to the first man I had seen, I began to wonder if my attempted suicide might have left me without a life worth leading should I have woken up. **I tried to move my hands again, applying force this time.**

Allen... the first man's name was Allen... it was stitched into his jacket and the first thought in my mind was of how the phone-a-shrink was also named Allen. **The other man's name was Jake... didn't ring any bells, but then again why should it? As best I could gather, this was my first time being awake in quite a while.** The ECG continued to beep, but it was the only audible one. The other people in the room, positioned exactly as I was, had theirs silenced. So what was so special about me?

“What do we do?” Jake gasped, looking frantically to Allen for answers.

“I... I don't know,” he replied, taking a few steps towards me. I watched him approach me, keeping my eyes locked with his. **He had a pudgy, warm face—the kind of guy you'd assume was into the touchy-feely crap for personal reasons, not just for pussy. His stance was strong, though he shook as he walked—no doubt from the anxiety my recent**

consciousness had caused him. I opened my mouth to speak, feeling the phlegm that had settled in my throat over time I'd been asleep. My voice cracked and wavered at first, but eventually became audible.

“Where am I?” I asked, taking another quick look at the room before returning my eyes to Allen. He flinched as I spoke and Jake, the other man in the room, looked as though he were going to faint. I continued to watch them for the moments after I spoke. Jake looked to Allen as he deliberated the course of action and Allen looked to me as I waited for his decision. **No one wanted to make the next move and I was quickly becoming frustrated with my position.** **“Where am I, Allen?”** I repeated, addressing him specifically to flush out a response. But, upon using his name, he appeared somewhat panicked. He quickly turned around to address Jake.

“Put him under, I'll call Maerd,” he instructed, walking across the room to an intercom panel. As Allen punched the numbers into the panel, Jake approached me uneasily, pumping a syringe full of some clear liquid.

“Hold on, I just want to know where I am,” I stated, attempting once more to free myself from the bands that restrained me. But Jake ignored me and continued his advance. **“Hey!”** I cried, thrashing about in my restraints as he inserted a needle into my IV. He extended one arm out to hold me down as I attempted to free myself. He finished with the needle and threw it into a blue bin. **Whatever he put into my IV worked and it worked fast.** **Soon enough I couldn't speak anymore, my eyes drew shut and any questions I had would have to wait.** I watched Allen's face as I drifted to sleep... panic and fear... why would he be afraid of me? Why would they have to restrain me? **And why did I have two variations of every question in my mind?**

CHAPTER 21

First thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a tiny gold fish swimming circles around itself. The fish's basketball sized bowl, resting on a flimsy banister, obscured my view of a window. **I moved slightly in the bed, free of restraints.** I had a comforter draped over me, as though I'd been tucked in. **Where am I?** This is probably another vision... Funny that I'd have a vision of myself waking up without visions... funny in a 'I've-gone-completely-fucking-mad' kind of way.

I sat up. The room was dry and smelt of linen. **I scanned it, taking note of the baby-blue overtone to an eggshell base—very posh for a hospital assuming, of course, I was still in or ever had been in one.** Where the fuck am I? **The room, though well designed and decorated, was almost completely devoid of substance.** There was no TV, no personal items or indication that anyone had ever set foot here. **It was meticulously clean—nothing out of place. Everything was symmetrical, such that even the coffee table's height was perfect relative to the couches. The lighting was an intense overhead gleam that accentuated the white of the walls. Every single detail was calculated and executed to a neutral pallet.** It was so calming, it made me nervous.

I swung my legs along the side of the bed and planted my feet upon the floor. I sunk slightly into the fluffy carpet as I stood up, pausing as the window came into view. The view was of a city—Boston. I approached it slowly, watching the fish swim. There was no indication of a

window at all, but for the window itself—no indentation in the wall or deviation from any other crevice... it was the only window. **I reached my hand out slowly to feel the glass, only to see the pixels of the picture fracture to my touch—it was a digital frame.** And, once again, I had no idea where I was.

I pulled my hand away from the frame, nudging the fishbowl accidentally in doing so. It teetered on the side of the banister and eventually fell. I flinched and looked at my feet. Shards of glass and muddy water surrounding a flailing fish fighting for breath. **I watched the life leave it... its fight fail as it breathed for the last time... Megan... Annie... where were they?** The questions were still there... I'd see them alive again—I have to... **no... they're dead... I remember now... and suddenly, where I am is irrelevant. I fell against a nearby wall and slid along its side until I met the floor.** I brought my hands to my head to try and keep it from exploding, finding no comfort in doing so. **My breaths became gasps and the heartache returned...** Megan.

I'd found her... but it wasn't her... whoever it had been, perched at her table in a wedding dress, it wasn't Megan... **her cold figure in the bathtub—seashell in her hand...** I felt a lingering sense of dread that caught my attention—the feelings were constant now, one following the next. No spikes or extremes. No absence or dormancy—only what came to mind **and the horror of memory. I had nothing left...** nothing... **Where am I?**

A short panic held me to my past... I found myself on my feet once more, exploring my surroundings. There was a bathroom—shower stall, toilet, and a sink, but no mirror. There was no kitchen. There was no dining room. The place was comparable to a bachelor's apartment, but for the charms of dirty dishes and porno magazines. **There was a heavy wood door at the end of the largest room, and a bed tucked in a corner. Next to the door was an intercom panel.** I tapped my fingers against my leg, realizing for the first time that I had been dressed differently than when I had previously awoken. Though

naked before, I was now fitted with plaid pajamas. I looked myself over, feeling the fabric as my eyes came to rest upon the left chest of my pajama top sporting one word... Josh... my name.

I found myself before the intercom panel, sliding an extended finger onto a big red button. I cleared my throat and leaned close to the microphone. **I noticed white noise coming from the speaker.** I could taste the air as I opened my mouth. **And I could feel my heartbeat... loud, pronounced thumps, reminding me that I was still alive... But for what... Why? Why? Why?** For questions... for answers... there are answers here. I know it.

“Hello?” I exclaimed, feeling my voice drown in silence. I released the button of the intercom and waited for a moment. There was no answer. **“Hello?” I restated, content with anything, so long as it was a reply.** But still there was nothing.

I turned from the speaker, feeling lost and afraid. **But a crackle filled the air and I turned to the intercom, once more.** The microphone sputtered as someone came on the other line. **I held my breath for a moment**—unsure of what to expect. **This was it.** The answers I’d waited for. **My chance to know what became of everything I’d lost, and to know if I’d lost it all or only my mind.**

“Someone will be with you shortly,” the intercom stated in a dry, unsympathetic tone. I took a startled step back from the speaker and waited for something of substance. Who would be with me shortly? Why would they be with me shortly? Why was I asking myself, and not the person on the other end of the intercom?

“Where am I?” I asked, pressing the big red button one more time. Silence. “Hello?” I whimpered, feeling helpless, confused and afraid. Who knew that feeling on a consistent basis could get tiresome? Grass is greener... **I shuffled over to a large sofa in the center of the room and lay**

down. I took note of a notepad perfectly aligned with a freshly sharpened pencil at its side. Time for the guessing game... too many questions and an infinity of answers—I had to concentrate to keep myself from jumping to conclusions. There are the obvious rationalizations—I'm dead, in a coma, insane, drugged-up, fucked-up, etcetera, etcetera... but, despite my conjecture, there was the simple fact of the matter—**Megan's not here... Annie's not here... wherever I'd woken seemed lonelier still to have no one waiting for me.**

My head was in my hands again. I ran my fingers along my temple, feeling the residual sensation of the gun barrel. I could remember Allen's voice fade as I fell insane. **I could remember Aaron's look as he left the room... the visions I'd had of the life I'd lived... the memories of Megan and Annie... and the gun... the antique revolver—pressed up against my head to end the pain. To rid me of life and take the feeling away.** This is what I remember... **telling my finger to move and then nothing... no bang, no pain—nothing.**

There was no scar. **I kept my fingers to my head, wishing I had a mirror or something like it, to try and find the scar from the bullet.** But there wasn't one—somehow they'd managed to scoop my brains back into me and apply a big enough band-aid to keep me pretty. **I felt my face, clean-shaven, but not by me.** I felt my head, clean-shaven but not by me. I remembered the hairdresser fucking-up and having to shave my head... before the wedding... **for whatever reason I remembered the wedding. I remembered Megan, seated at a long white table—happy, beautiful, sublime... but she didn't recognize me. I stood before her, broken, alone, needing nothing more than her love and she didn't recognize me... I'd killed her—it was my fault.**

Silence. I could feel tears billow and, as I had always done in the past, I looked to my surroundings to explain why I was feeling. Only now I'd no

indication of significance via emotional cues—I'd lost my spider-sense and felt I'd no sense of the world without it. No clue to question or answer to find. I'd lost my mind. I looked over to the dead fish on the ground and thought of Lana—the woman I'd worked so hard to convince myself I loved. But, in remembering Lana, I saw what I'd had for what it truly was. **I loved Megan—I needed Megan. But she was gone.**

I watched the door, waiting for the 'someone' who would be with me shortly. I folded my fingers around my hands and placed them between my knees. If I weren't mad already, waiting would have driven me there. **For the time being I had to assume they were gone and I was too.** I had to believe the visions were real and that I was something more than my psychosis.

I checked around, but there were no clocks, no calendars, or ticks carved into the walls—no indication of when one day ended and the next began. I saw it as a cell—one made to look like it wasn't. But the door was locked and I was trapped. I wasn't in any danger, yet I felt afraid and desperate to escape. **The only option was to sit and wait—prod myself with possibilities born of guesswork and dreams... Memories of Megan and Annie kept me sane.** Without the visions I was nothing—I had to remember them... **try to feel them again...** be at peace in the ignorance I'd misconstrued for misery. I'll see them alive one day... **I love you Megan.**

The door unlocked and I stood up, uneasily, to face it. I stood in a hunched forward hybrid of anticipation and apprehension. I could hear a debate on the other side of the door between two men. **Shortly after, what sounded like a ten-ton metal lock lifted, and the door swung open.** A man wearing a white lab coat, glasses, and a grimace stepped forward. He approached me gradually, someone closing and locking the door behind him as he did so. **His eyes stayed focused on mine and he looked bewildered and amazed at me.**

“Mr. Larrenberg?” he exclaimed, coughing mid-sentence and pausing for a reply. I stared vacantly at him, hoping he had more than an introduction in store for me. **“I’m Doctor Maerd,” he stated, giving me a look of expectation.** I said nothing, dropped my brows and cleared my throat. **Ten Mississippi. “Can you hear me?” he asked, looking in the direction of the door.** I looked where he did and wondered if he were speaking to me or if someone were listening—likely both.

“Where am I?” I inquired. His eyes quickly pulling back to me after I spoke. His expression fell—stunned—and for a moment, it seemed he would faint.

“You’re recovering, Mr. Larrenberg,” he explained, eventually finding the strength to speak. I eyed him suspiciously and took a step towards him. He seemed uneasy as I approached, but he held his stance.

“Why am I being held here?” I demanded, keeping my eyes over his shoulders to where I suspected others listened to our conversation.

“You’re not being held Mr. Larrenberg, you’re recovering. These quarters are for your safety,” he detailed, seeming preoccupied with questions of his own.

“If I’m not being held why is the door locked?” I asked, running the scenarios through my head of what I’d need protection for, or from.

“Mr. Larrenberg, if I may—I have a few questions I need answered before I’ll be able to satisfy your curiosity any further,” he said in an aggravated tone that led me to believe what he said was an order not a request. I paused and pondered the severity of my situation and the extent of my ignorance—it would be best for me to play ball.

“Ok,” I muttered.

“Please take a seat,” he stated, gesturing towards the couch. I followed his hand until I was seated before him. He took the chair across from

me and made himself comfortable. **“Mr. Larrenberg I have no doubt that you’re confused, but rest assured, there will be time for answers following my questions.”**

“Ok,” I repeated, nervously tapping my foot against the floor.

“Now... tell me about your life.”

“What about it?” I asked, wondering what I could possibly know that he’d need to question me about.

“Just about it—in general, please.”

“I’m going to need a little more direction than that, please,” I grumbled, frustrated that my welcoming committee to the afterlife (or wherever I was) had turned out to be a questionnaire. **He paused to re-think his wording and my demeanor—we could both feel the tension. We both had something to lose, in that we perceived the other had something to gain.** The only question was if we could cooperate enough to get past the uneasy feelings we gave one another.

“What’s your name?” he inquired, as though it were a legitimate thing to ask for someone who’d already referred to me by name. I stared at him for a moment, dumbstruck, and eventually pointed to the left breast of my pajama top where they had embroidered my name. **He didn’t look impressed.** **“Your surname too, please,”** he muttered, pulling the notepad and pencil from the table to his lap.

“Josh Larrenberg,” I exclaimed, watching him jot something down on the paper. I double-checked my answer for the obvious error of assuming the role of the people I’d followed. But I now felt convinced it was a better reply than detailing my escapades, erroneous though it may be.

“What’s the last thing you remember, Josh?”

I paused for a moment as I thought of Megan, dead in the bathtub. Thought of the wedding and everything I'd sought, abandoning me. And I remembered... **"Pressing the gun against my head,"** I replied, noting his discomfort. He wrote it, but seemed to resent doing so.

"You don't remember anything after attempting to kill yourself?"

"No," I declared, his reference to my attempted suicide ruling out the possibility that I was already dead. He glared at me for a moment, as though I'd just personally insulted him. He tapped the pencil on the paper and after a few moments continued with his queries.

"Do you remember me, Mr. Larrenberg?" he stated, intensity seizing his demeanor. It felt like I was being interrogated—only I didn't know for what or why... **but... in looking to him for recognition I could see his face from long ago...** his name spoken once upon a time but dismissed for insanity... **Maerd... the doctor who had been in charge of my mother's care...** and suddenly nothing makes sense. All my theories go out the window as a part of me seizes up in disgust... **I feel disgusted and ashamed for the revelation. His questions are now clear and I see the truth at long last.**

"Reverie... I'm at Reverie," I sighed, slouching forward as a wave of revelation crashed upon me. I felt lost, confused—a part of me understood, but I didn't understand it. Something's not right here—**Megan... Annie...** I'll see them again someday. I know it.

CHAPTER 22

Reverie... Reverie?²—the name of the town I'd dug through to find Megan Larrenberg... **where I'd sent my mother after her stroke, after her episode and loss of any life but that which Reverie could give her.** Maerd had left after I'd come to the conclusion. But how I'd come to it, or what it was for that matter, I'd no idea... Reverie?

I lay stretched out on the bed, now recognizing the offset color scheme for the new-age hospital dynamic of Reverie. Maerd seemed afraid of me when he left. And I wondered more and more if this were merely another vision, or if it were the final stretch of my delusion... **now reacquainted with my surroundings, I drew to mind all that I knew of them—my mother's fate, the debate between my brother and me of the moral implications—ironic now in that, for me to be here, he would have decided to have put me here... Aaron—would I see him again?**

The digital frame now showed dusk. **Silence.** I'd drawn a seashell on what remained of the paper that Maerd left behind. I held it close to me, caressing it as I had in times before to give me feeling. But now... **staring at the seashell I thought of Annie; of Megan. Of what I'd done, and what it meant for me to be in Reverie. Most importantly, it meant I'd survived. The bullet had failed me and I was left in torment.** Maybe Allen had figured out where I was and had gotten help to me before it was too late... **it meant Aaron had saved me and that he thought I was worth saving.** I don't remember anything since the phone call, since the gun barrel, but for the few

moments as I first awoke... for some reason I thought of my earliest memory, of being born—black at first. Quiet. **Silence.**

Maerd was older now which meant I would be too. I still remembered going with Aaron to meet him and discuss my mother's fate... before I lost Megan... I crumpled the seashell and threw it on the ground, giving the room personality in flaw. The shell paid me no tribute now, and I would give it no favor—I was being kept in a fucking cell and I didn't know why. **It dawned on me, as I watched the sun set behind a digital Boston, that my mother's premature death was because of her admittance to Reverie—it was part of the program, part of the experience—unfortunate, but necessary, as Maerd had once put it.** It dawned on me, as I scanned the room, that my surroundings and my dilemma may be nothing new, but for my recognition of them. It may be that this room, this cell, is the framework of my existence—the hell in which I rot. And that my escapades in search of Megan Larrenberg were no more than a past-time mirage... **you're not supposed to wake up from Reverie—you're supposed to die. Like my mother and everyone before her. You're supposed to die. But I didn't and suddenly** I understood why I was being held here.

I had owned long ago that I was not of a sound mind—that, after all, had been my absolution. To find the love I'd had... **Megan, Annie...** to return to them, if only for an instant. **But now that I'd realized why I was being held, the potential pitfalls of such became evident as well. It was entirely possible that I would never leave this cell—that I would never see Aaron again or... visit Megan's grave. That I lived at all seemed a travesty.** I curled my hand under my head and turned onto my side. I felt depressed to say the least—melancholy ripped at my soul. **I missed them unbearably as I no doubt would for the rest of my days.** But even amidst my misery question still lingered in mind... **a part of Reverie is to be born anew—disavow the life you've lived and person you've become; people you've loved and things**

you've done. If that were the case I should remember more than my life—I should have lived another...

My sorrow seemed an aftertaste home to a stranger's pallet... **after all, the very notion of Reverie was to give those dormant in life a second chance at it—though not what they'd had, it was the potential to start again...** my heartbeat droned low in my chest, passing like seconds—providing me a measure of time... **But if my second life had been, I didn't remember any of it. I am Josh Larrenberg—I had a wife Megan, and a daughter Annie; without them my name is all that remains of me.**

I sat up, suddenly scorned by thought—though ignorant of what... I remember seeing my mother for the last time before I sent her here—still, lifeless to the eye, but for the life inside—that which Reverie could give her again, though the world would keep it from her... it didn't make any sense. Where was I? What had happened? What was Reverie and how did it involve me?

I heard myself think of all that I'd used to convince Aaron of my case. Only now, I understood it for more than the naïve will of love—blind optimism to shelter me from the pain. Now I saw it for the truth—a lie; though perhaps valid for others it was to me, nothing... Maerd knew, but kept it from me—I wouldn't answer another question until he satisfied mine... I had lived no second life... I had no clean slate before me... all that I had was what I'd lost—that which I'd fled from—that which haunted me still. I was beyond redemption or escape—I would forever love Megan and Annie. I would forever long for what I'd lost. This was my curse... In seeing my cell for what it was, I knew that what truly plagued me lay within (as it no doubt always had)... I was mad and this was my house—kept for my safety in keeping others safe. I had to escape—find... **Megan... Annie...** to see them alive again someday. I know it.

CHAPTER 23

Meals were dropped off by a different person each time and no matter who it was they always refused to speak with me. **I thought only of Megan... only of Annie. And every time I considered a life outside of my cell, I realized I would have no more than I already did... But I did want to see Aaron again—to know I wasn't crazy; to apologize for what I'd had to do. I want to be on the road again—to end up sitting across the room from Megan, still expecting her to love and greet me... I wanted what I'd had... I wanted to do it over again... who knows, maybe my madness extended enough to permit recurring fantasies... maybe I was stuck in limbo and everything I'd ever loved was gone, but for the memories of them. Maybe...**

The intercom crackled and my focus escaped its infinite loop of dread and sorrow. I rose slowly from the couch, keeping my eyes on the door. I had just recently received my first meal of the day, so either someone had accidentally hit the button, or I was in for some news. **I fidgeted nervously about as I approached the intercom, practically drooling for something beyond the norm—every day since I'd revived, I'd wake up, eat, shit, sleep and spend every moment in-between tormenting myself with afterthoughts to all that I'd lost.** Though I stood at attention nothing was said... no news, no hope. The intercom went dead—the same as before. I dropped my eyes to the floor, feeling a wave of depression set in yet again.

Suddenly the latch to the door droned and I lifted my head in surprise. I could only hope it would be Maerd, or at least someone willing to

give me more than poorly-cooked food. **The door swung open as Dr. Maerd walked in, sporting a gray, pinstripe suit and a newspaper under his arm. He walked confidently up to me, turned and took a seat in the same place he had before.** This was my chance—I had to have answers to where, what, why, and the rest of the interrogatives.

“Good morning, Mr. Larrenberg,” Maerd exclaimed in a cheerier tone than I’d assumed him capable of. “Please have a seat.”

“Good to know it’s morning,” I replied, making my way towards the couch across from where he sat. **“You could at least have the courtesy to give me bars so there’d be no confusion about my situation,”** I grumbled, scowling at him as I sat down. He gave a forced smile before beginning his address of why it was he had come.

“You have my apologies for the manner in which you’ve been treated over the course of the past few days, Mr. Larrenberg. Rest assured, this hasn’t been easy for any of us,” he explained, not really explaining anything.

“This?” I muttered, squeezing out the faintest of questions as I now detected weakness in Maerd—he treated me like a person, apologized and made shallow attempts to empathize with me... he needed something.

“Yes... this,” he exclaimed, removing the newspaper from under his arm and dropping it atop the table before me. **‘This’ was my picture on the front page square under the headline: First Witness to Reverie.** It was the same picture of me I remembered seeing on the front page when I caused the accident... when this whole thing started.

“I’m afraid there isn’t time for you to read it right now, Mr. Larrenberg but I’ll paraphrase it for you,” he said, crossing his fingers and pressing his hands together. He held a diplomatic expression—the kind of diplomacy where he had all the power.

“It doesn’t matter,” I sighed, leaning back into my chair.

“I don’t think you understand the severity of this matter, Mr. Larrenberg.”

“No,” I declared, feeling a constricting anguish bleed about my mind. “I don’t think you understand my indifference to this matter,” I explained, using my first chance of speaking to Maerd as a way to bare a white flag, not a poker chip. “You knew me before I came here; you knew my family and you’ve read my file. And, if you’d bothered to speak to me but to assess if I could speak—you’d know I’ve lost the only things that matter to me.”

“Your brother is still alive Mr. Larrenberg. I know he matters to you,” Maerd stated, leaning closer to me to drive home the point. A vicious desperation gleamed in his eyes, like a wounded animal backed into a corner—he had my attention. “Now if you’ll please give me a moment to explain I’m sure you’ll come to see there are a few things you remain ignorant of,” he detailed, as though I could possibly know anything except for what the confinement of my cell had shown me.

“Fine,” I muttered, seeing the only thing of significance left in my life placed in jeopardy—Aaron. He was all that remained of the life I’d had—of the love I’d had.

“As you are no doubt aware, Reverie has never been completely accepted by some people. Though our methods and research have proven the effects and validity of Reverie, there has been no means to effectively detail the experience before now,” he clarified, feeding me hybrid information of their company pamphlet and news bulletins. “All those who are inserted into the program die as a result of it. As I recall you condoned this, contrary to your brother’s opinion, in that the life we give people is beyond that which they are confined to prior to their time with us.”

“Maerd,” I interrupted, frustrated with his regurgitated information, “I know the moral dilemma of Reverie; I don’t understand the science behind it, but I get the basic idea,” I exclaimed, hoping to preempt his confessions of hardships. “I know I’m here because I was either comatose or catatonic after I tried to kill myself—I know this because I know you don’t accept people, except for those who reached their unfortunate states by accident,” I continued, realizing I already knew everything he’d come to tell me. “I know Aaron brought me here and that I was supposed to die. But, for whatever reason, I didn’t and you weren’t able to keep my awakening a secret. I imagine that if you had, I never would have left this room.”

“We didn’t know what to do Mr. Larrenberg, that’s the explanation for your treatment. Moreover, we were unsure of your state of mind and how to come out with your ‘awakening’ to the public,” Maerd explained, making lame excuses to cover his nefarious dealings. I shook my head lightly at his feeble attempts to mask his intentions—he thought I was crazy and I knew he was right. This was an insane asylum, kept under lock and key by my delusion. There would be no convincing him I was sane as, even though he sat before me, I wondered if he were real... if this was real... if what I saw was there—or if there was more than what I saw.

“Now, I’m guessing since people know I’m awake they’re going to want to talk to me. And they’re gonna want to know about Reverie,” I said, seeing him tense up. “And I’m gonna guess that you’re willing to give or take whatever it takes to get me to play ball. Isn’t that right, Dr. Maerd?”

“That’s right,” he answered, grudgingly admitting how far he’d go to ensure the future of Reverie. To ensure I stayed inside where I was safe. None of this was real. I just had to wait it out like all the other visions.

“Well you’re in luck,” I declared, my eyes locked on the image of my eyes on the front page. “Because, other than the time I’ve done over the past few days, I hold no grudge against Reverie. So you don’t have to worry or threaten my brother and me. Your secret’s safe, quite simply, because I don’t know anything or care enough to tell what I do know.”

“You’ve become the focal point of the media, Mr. Larrenberg,” Maerd exclaimed, seeming pleased by my declaration of indifference. “While you are no doubt still grieving for the loss of your family, from here-on there is little chance of privacy or peace for you to come to terms with your loss,” he said, suddenly assuming the role of a caring psychiatrist. I felt my heart sink as my eyes rose to meet his. He knew of Megan and Annie, which would mean he’d know of my delusions surrounding them... This would be a trick—a false sense of security... if escape were an option, suicide wasn’t far behind.

“What’s your point?” I asked, apathetic to everything—even to the extensive pestering that Maerd suggested awaited me upon my release.

“My point is that there’s a press conference under way at this moment, in which you are scheduled to speak. Unfortunately, for the crowd, you are ignorant of your experiences while in the Reverie program and can not enlighten them any more than conjecture could,” he explained, standing up as the door to my confinement opened for us. “As best we can tell, you never accepted the program and were, instead, merely in a coma—in the same state as you were brought to us. In that the fee charged to you will be refunded and you will be generously compensated for the failure of services—as well as for your confinement over the past few days,” he detailed, as though my only concerns were a result of waking up. “Your brother has been informed and, following the

press conference, you will be taken to him. I hope there are no hard feelings.”

I didn't hear a word he said—for whatever reason, anytime I suspected an answer, my mind would grow so loud as to deafen all that I longed to hear. But I didn't have to hear him to understand what he was saying—this was my delirium, my psychosis. This place, and he, were both key factors in keeping me from freedom; keeping me behind these walls and away from the answers I seek... I'm crazy, but I've enough sanity left in me to know that where I am doesn't add up... who I am doesn't add up... there's a piece missing from the puzzle and I have to find it. I have to... I see them alive again. I know it. **Maerd left the room and I followed him... I felt faint, weak. I didn't want this. I was in the know enough to wish I didn't know. Something about Maerd's theory that I didn't accept the Reverie program didn't add up... I felt different—I felt something deep inside me struggle against my will for one of it's own...** I struggled to contain myself as I was led outside. Escape consumed me—I would be free, back on the road again... **Not long now.**

CHAPTER 24

My head rose by light of a thousand cameras. I couldn't see anything... I couldn't hear anything, but for an indistinguishable commotion coming from what sounded like a sea of people. I was out of my cell—of that I was sure. But now I found myself worrying that wherever I was, it was just the next layer—the next page of my manifest reality... just another vision... never ending... I see them again alive. I know it.

“Mr. Larrenberg!” I heard echo from one person's call to the next. My eyes scanned the room, filled from corner to corner, with scrambling journalists and miscellaneous members of the press. **“Josh! Josh!”**

Maerd quickly made his way to the front of the room, where a bouquet of microphones rested atop a podium. But everyone was looking at me. I stood awkwardly, my eyes darting from one person to the next. Some tried to ask me things, their words gurgled in the depth of shouting. Others reached out their cards, their arms falling short of me by way of security guards holding them in check. I watched the puddle of business cards grow—the tribute of lawyers, reporters, and just about anyone who could make a dollar off of me or my misfortune.

“Mr. Larrenberg?” someone said as they placed their arm upon my back and motioned towards a seat beside the podium. I complied and nervously tugged at the clothes they'd put me in prior to meeting the press. I felt afraid—intimidated. My sight was literally zero. It sounded like I

was in a hall of monkeys screaming for a banana... Maybe I'd finally gotten to the bottom of my subconscious. Maybe this was the origin of my delusion—blindly stumbling in an unknown place, amidst chaos and confusion, knowing of and looking for something more. Or maybe a metaphor was the only thing I could bring to mind to try and calm me enough to keep from running.

Don't move. Don't breath. Panic.

Maerd took the spotlight and the crowd drew silent. I could feel eyes upon me. **I took a seat behind the mic as the press conference began—a general address, recap of the situation and lame opening joke ensued. But I couldn't focus; I couldn't concentrate. I could only obsess. Megan... Annie... I'd lost them; they were gone... and now I was born anew to die again, over and over in every second without them.**

“By way of Mr. Larrenberg's account and the findings of our research, it would appear he did not accept the Reverie program. Unfortunately, we don't know why,” Maerd explained, the crowd erupting with questions following his statement.

I felt cold shivers run up and down my spine—something about this seemed uncomfortably familiar. **I kept my eyes on the ground, unable to handle the cameras' constant watch.** I could feel a tear pace down my cheek, but when I raised my hand to wipe it away it had passed. **I longed for peace knowing I would have none—that my unique position would see me undone. I was supposed to die—I wasn't supposed to feel these things again. I'm not strong enough to survive them...** I had to escape, I had to run if only to try. This place, this world, wherever I was—it ate away at me like... **my obsession had become a requiem for my family. Still, I could feel love in remembering them... I'll see them again some day. I know it.**

“He has no memories, except for those of this life. Nor does he recall anything following his attempted suicide,” Maerd detailed, speaking of me as though I were a study, not a man. And, as I thought of it, I realized that’s all I had become. The press would know my story and soon the world too.

Who I was, was gone; what remained was nothing more than a front page passing, news bulletin stock footage, or a fleeting sob story to inflate ratings. This was the truth of what remained—for what the public saw of me was exactly what I would give anything to hide: My daughter was killed in a car accident and my wife took her life soon afterwards. I tried to kill myself, but failed. I was inserted into a program designed for people unable to lead lives of their own, with the intent of being started anew. But now, I was awake and everyone was watching. There was no articulation beyond that—no reality more than what the papers would say. Because to them it had been years, but to me seemed only a day... I didn’t even have the luxury of being a statistic—my misery made me a focal point. My story made me entertainment for people to fill themselves up enough to reflect upon themselves. No more—ever more.

I was mad—had gone crazy. My sight would return, of that I was sure... but... it didn’t matter because, even with it, I was blind. All that I had seen, all that I had loved and longed for, was taken from me in that it was never there. A dream, perhaps... but where was I now? What had come of Megan Larrenberg if ever she had been? I love her so much... Annie... Megan... I’ll see them alive again. I know it. I know it. I know it... but if all I have left is delusion, who’s to say what knowing is if what is isn’t known?

“Has he suffered any neurological repercussions due to his attempt upon his life?” a reporter asked, following Maerd’s consistent refusal to detail the potential for other unknown Reverie failures.

“No. He is, as best we can tell, exactly the same as he was beforehand.”

“Considering the lucid dynamic of the Reverie program in conjunction with its strong relation to dreaming, would it be possible that he somehow doesn’t remember being inside Reverie, but was in fact there? Or, for that matter, that he does remember Reverie, but chooses to conceal it?” another reporter inquired, starting up debate regarding the validity of my claims—if I’d given a shit about pride, I’d have likely been offended. That I’d enough focus to hear them at all surprised me... every passing moment became more agonizing than the last.

“I nor anyone here at Reverie will comment on conjecture. We are confident that he was not accepted into the Reverie program, and woke up as a result of time spent naturally in a coma,” Maerd detailed, fending off the attacks upon his employer, not my name. How much longer would I be poked and prodded for the sake of the public’s interest? I could feel the anguish brood inside me—such instances of spiking emotion had been frequent enough in the past to grant foresight beyond what consumed me—to know it would pass, only to rise again. I didn’t know why I felt sanity slip away as emotion and devastation flooded my mind. But I was lost in Reverie... If I were mad, how had I retained the capacity to think in linear focus? How did I recall all that had happened from the accident until my death? How was I alive today, and for what should I stay tomorrow?

I stopped thinking as the exchange between Maerd and the press came to a standstill. I raised my head from my fixation on the floor to see everyone now staring at me. A few security guards helped me up, not so much to help me as to get me to the microphone. Apparently it was my time to talk. Only, I had no idea what it was I was supposed to say. They’d assured me that, after this, I’d be free. After this, I’d be returned to Aaron and left to lead what would never again be a normal life or, for

that matter, one worth living. I stood before the microphone, flashes from cameras paring my heart as it pounded in my chest. Everyone asked questions at once, and I couldn't understand any of them. Maerd personally selected those who would interrogate me; those who would rip me apart and shit on my life for a mark on their page. But it didn't matter—nothing mattered.

“How do you feel, now that you're awake?” a reporter chimed, as I delivered myself enough from remorse to address the crowd.

“About the same,” I replied, clearing my throat as my voice cracked over the speakers.

“What will you do now?” another reporter asked, the sum of them seeming frustrated by the restrictions of my ignorance. This was pointless and they knew it, too.

“I don't know,” I answered, dropping my eyes from the cameras fixated on me.

“Why did you try to kill yourself?” yet another reporter inquired, already beginning the decay of thought that would bring them to my misery... Annie... Megan.

“Because... I... I didn't want to live anymore.”

“Do you want to now?”

“No,” I stated, lifting my eyes to the camera as I said it.

“Did you dream about your wife or daughter while you were at Reverie?” a voice asked, no longer belonging to an individual but rather the ambiance of the crowd—malicious, cut-throat-curious, and insensitive as all hell. I could feel the tears drop within me—blanket my soul, now dead for all to see.

“I don't remember.”

“Why did your wife kill herself?”

I didn’t respond. Tears ran down my face, and more flashes came consequently. If they could break me their story was made. I wouldn’t fight it or them, for I’d no fight left in me. I was crying and I didn’t know why. I felt the way I did at the accident—as though I’d nothing left... still, I was blind... still, I was deaf... was I alive at all? Had I ever woken up or been awake? Where am I?

“I don’t remember Reverie,” I said, choosing to make a statement rather than suffer abuse. “I don’t... I lost my family and to you all it may have been some time, but for me... I just... I don’t want to talk anymore... I don’t want to be asked any more of these questions. I don’t know anything anyways,” I exclaimed, losing myself by flood of tears. I turned, broken, from the microphones to the lesser of two evils. Maerd took the stand and I took my seat. Soon it would be over... soon I would be free... I couldn’t live like this—I wouldn’t live like this. I woke up once before, I can do it again... this isn’t a cry for help, it’s a suicide.

CHAPTER 25

I felt frustrated and alone. I could feel utter outrage boil inside of me, seeking to control me, and then fading to indifference; vanishing to the realization that no amount of pain could match what I already felt, that no degree of turmoil arising from my crisis of late could ever compare with what lay within me. These moments were trite and irrelevant. A deranged joke of a callous god. I didn't care about anything and, yet, I was required to act the part. I was required to answer questions no one had the right to ask.

My sight had returned. I sat in the back of a limo, alone once more. The driver had the black divider up and the doors were locked—presumably for my safety. I had no idea where I was or what had happened... another vision perhaps—I'd never escape them... and all that is and ever had been would be tainted by them... the limo turned down a crowded road and came to a halt. I pushed myself out of my mental stupor and slid along the seat until I was near the front. I pulled my arm up to the tinted divider between the driver and me. I knocked a few times upon it, only to see it eventually lower by my request—either luxury treatment for a mental patient, or my mind's own little spin on reality.

“What can I do for you, sir?” the driver asked in a well-mannered tone.

“I know the way to my brother's house from here and I'd like to walk, please,” I replied, recognizing the buildings around us.

“Your brother’s expecting you any moment now, Mr. Larrenberg.”

“He won’t mind if I’m late,” I stated, hearing the doors unlock for me.

“Very well, sir. If you’d like, I can accompany you,” he offered—seemingly out of compassion, not obligation.

“No. I’ll be fine,” I sighed, climbing out of the vehicle into the sunlit street of my youth. The limo pulled away soon afterwards and I made my way to the sidewalk—alone. Annie had been buried nearby, and I assumed Megan would have been, too. I made my way slowly along the street, keeping my head low. The few people that were around were staring right at me, and it dawned upon me that my press conference earlier in the day in conjunction with the front page picture of myself had made me more than identifiable. I could only hope to avoid encounters.

I veered off the path I’d chosen, opting instead for alleyways and schoolyards. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and dropped my eyes to the ground. I didn’t recognize anything and couldn’t tell where I was; yet, somehow, I knew where I was going. I was free from the hospital to the stretches of my mind—this couldn’t be real, after all. None of it could. I simply had to hope it would pass and that I’d wind up someplace that made sense to be.

The graveyard looked to be more a garden than a tomb. Tall trees stretched above the graves and a sweet musky smell seeped into my nostrils. Mausoleums and statues of stone watched me—approaching the graves of my wife and daughter. Annie’s gravestone was small—half the size of Megan’s. Sure enough they were beside each other with an empty spot next to Megan—where I should lay. I suddenly became aware of the silence. Of the desolate plot of graves stretching on for eternity. I envied the dead... and, as I stood fixated on the names chiseled in stone, I knew I’d

no choice but death. I had shown myself all I needed to see—they were dead; they were gone.

I sat before them, remaining still as I watched them silently—their stones a testament to their deaths. I could die here... I could take my life and be content without it—for the purpose it served had passed. But... Aaron... I owed him more than another tragedy. At least enough to tell him so. I rose from the ground. Soon it would be over and I'd no need to question any longer. **I raised my eyes to see a man staring at me from afar.** He leaned on a shovel while smoking a cigar. He wore some sort of jumpsuit covered in dirt, and a dumbshit grin aimed at me. I remembered him but couldn't place from where. **I turned from my family, though it pained me to do so, and made my way out of the cemetery.**

Ten minutes later found me back on the main street, a few blocks from Aaron's house. I noticed people noticing me, stopping to talk about or point at me. I wondered how much they knew and what they'd been told; if their looks were out of pity, or just pitiful. I became distinctly aware that, wherever I was, I didn't belong. Everyone stared at me and, though I passed them one after another, there was always someone to take their place. **I was an instant celebrity and all I had to do was endure hell and wake up to see everybody watching.**

"Oh my god," a woman gasped, standing behind me as I slowed for a 'don't walk' sign. I turned, having realized nobody responded to her, and the silence was a result of my failure to. A teenage girl stared open mouthed at me. She hunched forward in disbelief and, for whatever reason, wore no shoes—I assumed she had dropped whatever it was she had been doing in order to address me. I didn't know what to say.

"I recognize you," she stated, giving no identifiable signs as to whether or not that was a good thing. "From the paper," she continued, now giving a heartbroken expression. "I'm so sorry," she stated,

reaching, out of sympathy, to touch my arm. I stood still, baffled and unsure of what to say.

“Thank you,” I whispered, turning sharply and disappearing around a corner. I could feel the tears brood as my breaths became quicker. I now wanted to know what the paper said and the extent to which my life had been blown open. I found a small diner and ducked inside to see if they had any copies of today’s paper.

The diner was as monotonous and indistinct as inside-out road kill. The room sounded of light chatter, rattling ventilation, and a sizzling grill pissing grease into the air. The waitresses were coming down from their night shifts; ready to head home and tend to the babies they’d had as kids. Truckers and bikers sat hunched over, their guts pressed up against their tables, breathing heavily as they filled their mouths with slop. The horseshoe counter prided three fry cooks and made me think of a trough—suitable, as a pig made his way to it. **But I didn’t care about the cop or any of it. All I cared about was the front page picture of me staring at me from a stack of papers.**

I made my way to the counter and picked up a paper. I took a seat near the door and glanced over the public’s take on my life. Sure enough, they’d done their research. The paper said everything. Everything of Annie’s accident and Megan’s death... even things I didn’t know. That the driver who hit Annie had tried to kill himself out of grief and guilt... that my story and Aaron had both received previous attention from the press following my suicide attempt. Apparently, it was tragic enough to be worth reporting on.

‘Smoke on the Water’ by Deep Purple, came onto the speakers and I lifted my head momentarily from the paper to see the officer seated across from me. He flipped a pair of convenience-store aviators off his face and planted them next to a badge pinned on his left tit. His skin was rough, as though it’d been slashed and dried—short, unshaven hairs played the part of

tombstones to long-dead zits. I couldn't hear him speak over the noise in the place but I watched him intently nevertheless. He pulled a newspaper in front of him and seemed to relax. **I returned to reading the story about me until I got a cold sensation that seemed too familiar to dismiss.** I glanced up quickly to catch the cop scanning me up and down.

Fwoomp—Smack—what the fuck?

I heard a giggle that made my head turn slowly towards the culprit: a Dennis-the-Menace little brat, straw clutched in hand, smiled at me innocently. **I peeled the spitball off my temple and looked at it—visceral anxiety and fear growing inside of me. I looked back to the child as his mother became aware of his actions.**

“Jeremy!” the woman shrieked, taking her child by the arm and leading him away. **“I’m sorry about that,”** she muttered to me as she passed; **thankfully without recognizing me. But as I returned my eyes to the cop and his paper I saw that he had identified me.** I shook a few bills out of my wallet and walked quickly towards the door. But he still watched me, turning his chair to follow my movements—something nobody but me seemed to notice or regard as odd. It was clear he had an interest in me, and I needed to leave before everybody else in the diner caught on. I walked to the exit, doing my best to avoid eye contact with anyone. I pressed my palm on the window of the front door instead of the handle and leaned into it. Glare from the sun caught my eye as I pushed the door open, revealing an infinite regress of faded handprints hidden in the glass.

Something wasn't right here... I felt... like I was in a dream—like I'd done this before... but, then again, nothing felt like it used to. I could feel now and I wasn't used to it. **So who's to say what my perception is but**

for the shadow of my misery? I dismissed my feeling of angst on account of my ignorance of feeling. **I had wasted enough time—I needed to see Aaron and tell him I'm sorry. Tell him I love him one last time.**

CHAPTER 26

The paparazzi were following me. I noticed men hiding behind bushes and cars, taking my picture as I walked—I don't know why, and I didn't care to find out. **I had to see Aaron though I feared doing so. I felt terrible for what I had put him through... and even more so that I had confessed to do it again. I prayed he could see my pain enough to let me die.**

I stood before a two story, brick house, bordering an empty street. Birds sung from an apple tree in the front yard, and I could hear children at a playground in the distance... I felt tired... weak. I trudged up to the front step of the place and stomped my feet on a welcome mat. I checked my watch as I lifted my hand to the door, knocking loudly... 3:43... I heard a rustling from somewhere in the house and waited patiently to be acknowledged. Three fleeting glimpses of pains endured went by and the door opened.

“Hey Aaron,” I said, lifting an eyebrow as he lingered behind a half closed door that concealed him from the waist down.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled, looking me up and down twice over. He held a dumbfounded expression as he loosened his grasp of the door; it drifted open gradually, to reveal he wasn't wearing underwear. “I can't believe you're here,” he exclaimed, completely oblivious to his nudity.

“They didn't tell you I was coming?” I replied, making a confused face since Maerd had stressed our reunion.

“No they did... I’m sorry, come in,” he stated, pivoting back and forth, his lower half swinging in the wind. I walked by my brother, almost amused by him as he stumbled around the place, frantically searching for either pants, sanity, or a bigger penis. I found my way to the kitchen and planted myself in a tableside chair, next to a stained pair of pants that explained why Aaron was naked. A few moments later, he walked into the room wearing a pair of blue basketball shorts.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” he asked, finally settling in his seat.

“Beer please,” I sighed, thinking momentarily about questioning Aaron’s reasoning for sending me to Reverie.

“Sure thing,” he said, standing up and reaching for the fridge. He fumbled around with its contents for a while and eventually pulled out a couple bottles of beer. He placed one before me and kept the other for himself.

At that moment a grandfather clock chimed in, cutting my thought process off. Aaron took a long swig of beer before setting it down on the far corner of the table. The dirty-yellow of the appliances in his kitchen gave me the creeps. And, for whatever reason, I was consumed with familiar feelings of confusion and fear... something wasn’t right about this...

“You must have a lot of questions,” he gleamed, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms out to the table.

“And how do you figure that?”

“Well we are brothers,” he exclaimed, appearing ecstatic to see me once more. I looked at the big dumb smile I remembered of him and it warmed my heart. His stupid scruffy hair and unkempt nails that I’d always teased him about, I was now delighted to see. But all the same it was a fleeting indulgence—lapse of sorrow and pain.

“Aaron,” I muttered, getting straight to the point. “This doesn’t really make any sense to me,” I explained, a feeling of unrest building.

“What doesn’t make any sense?” he demanded, his tone changing from relaxed to worried.

“This whole thing,” I replied, taking a swig of beer while nervously touching my face with the other hand. “I mean I basically woke up and was told I’d been in the Matrix. And to be honest it doesn’t matter to me at all because I’m still exactly where and who I was when I tried to kill myself.”

“Are you ok?” he asked, making a concerned face at first, but changing mid-sentence to a perplexed one.

“No. I’m not ok, Aaron,” I confessed, practically losing myself to tears just being in the room with him. “And I’m not going to be ok... why did you send me to Reverie? I mean I don’t blame you for it, I just don’t understand,” I stated, recalling his longstanding distaste for Reverie.

“Because I thought you’d have wanted it that way. I thought maybe your other life would turn out better than this one. I just wanted the best for you,” he explained, looking ashamed of his actions by way of my query.

“I know Aaron,” I sputtered, wanting to tell him what I’d have to do—to ask the only person left that I loved for permission to kill myself. But I couldn’t ask as he could never accept it. I looked into his eyes, seeing how truly thrilled he was to be with me again, and I felt what was left of my heartbreak. I’m sorry, Aaron.—I have to. “Do you... do you have a picture of them?”

He stayed silent and watched me for a moment after I spoke—seeing that the pain I'd felt had never left me; that all I'd run from chased me still, to an absolution of what was.

“Yeah. I'll go get one for you,” he answered, standing up from the table and walking upstairs. I exhaled loudly and looked about my surroundings, my eyes coming to rest upon the framed American flag hanging by the doorway. I recognize that flag... from my desk... from this house... I made my way to the drawer and pulled it open to see that Aaron had kept the antique revolver I'd used to kill myself. I checked if it were loaded and stuffed it in my pocket before he returned. As I took my seat once more, I heard him approach. He turned the corner, pinching a single photo between his fingers. He extended his hand, and, gently placed it before me. Silence.

I could see them—so close, I could reach out and touch them. It was of Megan and Annie—long before the accident. Megan wore a red scarf that wrapped around her neck, just as her arms did around our daughter. Annie wore a howling smile of glee and delight as she wrestled against Megan to avoid having her picture taken—I remembered the moment perfectly. Love is knowing the pain of losing what you love—and knowing that it was worth it. In that picture I could see love eternal; pain ever after.

“Thank you,” I whispered, plucking the picture from the table and pulling it down to my lap. My head sank, my eyes following the picture.

“You're welcome,” Aaron answered, letting me grieve rather than forcefully consoling me. I knew he was there and I knew he loved me. I hoped he knew I felt the same, despite what would come of the day's end.

“I’m... I’m gonna go for a walk,” I sighed, pushing the picture into my pocket and standing up.

“Did you want any company?” he asked, standing up along side of me—worried, and rightfully so.

“No thanks. I’ll be fine,” I muttered, unable to shake the picture from my mind—once again seeing all that I’d had, for all that I’d lost.

“Well, it would make me feel better if you weren’t alone right now.”

“Funny, because it would make me feel better to be alone right now,” I stated, trying to dissuade his attempts to tag along. “I’ll see you later,” I said, walking towards the door.

“Josh, wait,” Aaron exclaimed, placing his arm over mine, attempting to hold me a moment. I turned to look at him and... I recognized him... I’d seen him before; I’d been here before... Aaron Larrenberg... but why was I back? Why was my mind painting this picture again, and how was it important?

I turned slowly towards him, giving a curious look. His expression changed from concerned to perplexed. I looked behind him to a grandfather clock that I remembered had chimed; a yellow-dirty décor and the chair that I’d sat in and questioned him by. But, if this was a replay, why was I different? Why did I stand someplace else, wear different clothes, and see all new things? Why did my mind bring me here, to show me more of what I never understood?

“Aaron Larrenberg?” I asked, feeling the urge to poke him and prove him real.

“What are you talking about, Josh?” he replied, removing his hand from my arm.

“How do you know my name? Where am I?” I demanded, frantically searching what I saw for answers in the short time before it would inevitably fade. His face distorted to what I remembered of him... sitting at the table across from me as I questioned him of my endeavor.

“Are you joking?”

“When was I here before?” I cried, feeling what had been slowly seeping through. Feeling the memory of my surroundings cave in upon me. For without the memory, I had never been... wherever I was, the hell I rot in. But... if I had never been here, why did I remember it—why did the sights of the day seem like memories?

“Josh, calm down,” Aaron exclaimed, placing his hands upon my shoulders out of compassion—as though we were friends, as though we were brothers. I’d no memory of him save for the fleeting glimpse I’d lived in my search for Aaron Larrenberg... back in the town of Reverie. Before I found Megan; before I killed myself and woke up wherever the hell it was I was now.

“No!” I screamed, feeling my sight fade... my grasp of reality and myself come crashing to the ground. The answer’s here... I know it... but... I’m losing... I... **I raised my head from the ground to see Aaron’s hands upon my shoulders, consoling me. “I have to go, Aaron. I’m sorry,”** I stated, turning from him and running out the door. He didn’t chase me—he didn’t do anything more than watch me flee. He knew I wasn’t coming back and that he couldn’t stop me from leaving. I suppose he’d hoped for a better goodbye than another suicide.

CHAPTER 27

I stood atop Megan's grave, fixated on her tombstone as I lay her picture before it. I breathed deeply, calmly—knowing it would be over soon. I could think of nothing but what I had just seen; where I had just been. And, with that, every moment became horrific—the way it had been before the suicide. Jumping from emotion to emotion for the hope of a clue... it's as though I've lived this before.

I have to work to keep my mind clear. To stay focused. Because, for whatever reason, I can feel everything now—it floods over me and I drown in sorrow, in love... in all that the visions have shown me... I see my dreams unfolding before my eyes a nightmare. Tonight it ends. I can't do it any longer. I can't question and I won't go through the rest of my days without answers. This isn't a cry for help, it's a suicide.

I'd no time to waste. I lay on the ground, flat on my side, and looked beyond what I saw. And then, somewhere in the distance, I could see... Megan, Annie, myself... living happily again—together. I could see everything of the life we'd had... we moved into our new house... we went to the zoo... I stayed at home with Annie and finger-painted... I could see the love in Megan's eyes when she stopped to watch us... I could see how much we had, now that it was gone... My hands were dry, and a cold sweat poured over me... my earliest memory—my mother being told by two soldiers that my father had died. Seeing the flag... waking up to what I thought was my birth... I love you Megan.

The sun gleamed through the trees, the light pixeling as it broke through the leaves. The wind shook the world while I lay still upon it. My mind screamed to me as though everything I didn't understand lay before me. As though every answer I'd sought had been given already. **I looked down at my palm, clenching the gun. In death there was at least the chance I would see them again—hold and love them as I did before. That was all I wanted; all I cared about. I took one final breath and brought the antique revolver to my temple. I pulled the trigger... Reverie.**

CHAPTER 1

I lifted my head from the depths of reverie to see Aaron blowing bubbles in his milk. I felt like I'd just woken up. But I'd merely zoned out as I waited for the hour to roll around. A blind date with some girl named Megan. I waited in the foyer, avoiding my brother who sat reclined in a chair, teetering on two legs. Our mother was out for the night and had given me the car. Aaron took offense to this and made his distaste known. If I got the car, it meant he had to stay in for the night. His eyes escaped the television long enough to glare at me and I ran potential arguments through my head, along side of possible subject matter for my upcoming dinner date.

“Do you honestly have nothing better to do than just sit there?” he bitched, changing the channels too quickly to tell what was on.

“Yeah, but I don't want to get there early and give her the option of leaving if she doesn't like what she sees,” I replied, being a little more self-deprecating than usual.

“Well, as it is, you're going to be late. So why don't you just go and leave me in peace?” Aaron snapped, putting the remote down to direct his full attention towards aggravating me. I sneered at him and stood up, plucking my coat from a nearby hanger.

“Enjoy the night alone,” I grumbled, passing by the framed American flag on my way out the door.

“Screw you,” Aaron cried, catching the last word as I closed the door behind me. What an asshole, I thought, as I made my way to the car. Why was he still living at home, anyway? And how come he didn’t have anything better to do than aggravate me?

I popped open the car door and slid my ass into the driver’s seat. My mind entertained thoughts of embarrassment and humiliation of the night to come, but the drive to the restaurant calmed me—the road passing constant and infinite enough to put me to sleep, let alone slow my mind. Who knows, maybe we’d actually like each other.

I tugged nervously at my suit as I walked up to the restaurant. I’d given up my car to the valet, who seemed more than a little disappointed to have received my piece-of-shit red Lincoln. I was too distracted counteracting my inevitable fuck ups to worry about that now. I walked into the place, and was immediately intercepted by a hostess.

“Do you have a reservation?”

“Yeah, I’m meeting someone here,” I replied, scanning the crowd for any twenty-foot-trolls that Lana might have set me up with as a joke.

“What’s the name?” the hostess asked, giving me some of the quintessential French attitude/hospitality.

“Larrenberg,” I muttered, spotting a woman wearing a red evening gown—spaghetti straps, open back, and revealing enough to affirm me of her beauty while, at the same time, teasing me with it.

“Go right ahead, she’s waiting for you,” the hostess stated, redirecting her attention to a phone call.

“I’m sorry, which table?”

“That one,” she replied, pointing to the table where the woman in the red dress was seated. I swallowed my tongue and practically shit myself. The last thing I had expected was for her to be beautiful, let alone drop-my-jaw gorgeous. Hopefully I’d be able to make it through the night without embarrassing myself too much.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, passing the hostess and walking towards Megan. Her eyes lifted to me as I approached, almost as though she were checking me out. A mutual friend of ours, Lana, had set us up on a blind date. And, as I approached Megan, I don’t think I’d ever been so happy and relieved to see anyone—except for the near certainty that she’d be disappointed in me. I had to kick my self-deprecating tendencies again as I came to stand before her. She smiled at me, and my heart melted.

“Josh, right?” she exclaimed, her voice swaying somewhat—as though she were nervous. I felt awkward in my suit, worried that she’d see me for the fraud I was. Don’t move. Don’t breath. Panic.

“Megan, right?” I replied, taken aback, mostly because of how hard I was trying keep my eyes off her cleavage. The color scheme was a baby blue overtone to an eggshell base. Fine china, tall pillars, open space and packed seating. A mellow jazz played over the sound system and our waiter dropped off a bottle of red wine to accompany Megan’s already-poured glass. I took a seat, conscious of my every movement for just looking at Megan made me weak... it felt like we’d met before... like we were old friends or lovers.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she stated, extending her hand to shake mine.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I mumbled, losing my voice to anxiety. I commanded myself to pull it together—this woman was perfect, sublime. Everything I could ever want and never need anything

but. I had to be charming and confident long enough to at least get a second date. She seemed entertained by my demeanor. Her lips peeled apart and her cheeks rose. I stared at her teeth, fixated on her beauty... I felt love, I felt hope... I saw a future here.

“So... Lana didn’t really tell me much about you other than what you do,” she said, taking a whisper-sip of her wine and adjusting her place in her seat—she was anxious too. And for whatever reason that came as a relief to me and I was able to relax.

“Given that I’m an afterthought to my employers, what I do probably isn’t the best piece of info to go by,” I exclaimed, my response falling somewhere in the realm of clever but exceedingly wordy.

“Well what’s the rest?” she answered playfully.

“The rest?” I blurted out, too busy examining what I’d just said to come up with something new. “Well... I’m the second child. I grew up just outside of Boston and still lived at home till just last year. I’m presently working as a low level manager as Lana informed you, but I’ll spare you any further details since they’d no doubt bore both of us,” I described, watching her listen to me. She stared at me, nodding her head and smiling every so often. I felt anxious; I felt my heartbeat quicken and my mouth go dry. I felt worried about what she thought, concerned about the progress of the conversation, and fixated on the mild amount of cleavage she showed that I insisted on keeping my eyes off. “What I’d actually like to do is go to school and get into philosophy. But something tells me that if I did, I’d probably have to move back in with my mother,” I finished, sticking to the first name basis details before getting to the good stuff. She smiled, before she responded to what I said, and everything was as it should be—as I would have had it for the rest of my life.

“I guess in the end, you have the beginning...”