

COMORBID

Lorelei Logsdon

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PROLOGUE

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Of all the things James could be focused on at that precise moment, the only thing that filled his vision was the stranger's white knuckles as he choked the life out of James's father. His father had it coming, of course, and James was a little torn between feelings of jealousy and admiration for the stranger who had burst into their home all knight-in-shining-armor-like. Not that James needed someone to save him. He had been more than ready to do the deed himself, and was unsure if he was grateful or irritated that the opportunity had been snatched away.

In shock, he now simply stood to the side and focused on anything except the piercing, enraged glare emanating from his father's dying eyes. James didn't help the stranger by holding down his father's flailing, groping hands, nor did he help his father by prying the stranger's fingers from his father's throat. He just stood beside them both, mute in voice and action, his eyes wide while the scene unfolded.

When his father eventually lay limp on the floor, next to the body of his mother, the stranger turned to James. The large man had shoulder-length dirty-blond hair and intense brown eyes, and wore heavy cowboy boots on his large feet. He straightened his shirt, smoothed his hair with his strong, confident, lethal fingers, and approached James, who shrank back against the wall, frightened at what the man might do to *him* next. In all his seventeen years, James had never seen such a ferocious, strong man who was capable of such acts of violence—his own father's propensity for inflicting torturous pain aside.

"Now, you listen here," the stranger said, staring into his eyes and leaning over so that he was a mere hair's breadth away from James. The man's breath was hot and acrid on his face, but James didn't dare turn away. "I was not here. If you tell a single soul about me, I will come back and do the same thing to you that I just did to your father. Do you understand? And don't think for one minute that I won't follow through on that threat."

James couldn't answer, so he merely nodded imperceptibly.

"Say it, boy."

"Y-you weren't here. I didn't see you."

"That's it," the stranger said, patting him on the shoulder. He straightened up to his full

height and turned to the front door.

“Who are you?” James whispered, unsure if he really wanted to know.

The man paused in his retreat and turned back, locking his hard gaze on James. “It’s none of your concern who—” He broke off whatever it was that he had intended to say and let out a loud sigh instead. There was a slight shift in the way he held his shoulders, and his eyes softened, just a bit. “Look, James, I’ve seen you around, is all, and I know what’s been going on here, and I’ve been waiting for you to man up and do something about it.” He spun back around and opened the front screen door, taking a step outside into the night before turning his head back to James. “But you didn’t do anything about it, and now your mother is dead. At least I was able to save *you*.” The man turned away and jogged down the couple of steps to the broken front walk and casually walked away. Before James lost sight of him in the moonless night, the stranger called over his shoulder, “The name’s Alistair, and you remember what I said—not a word.”

James fell to his knees and a sob escaped his throat, hot tears coursing down his cheeks as he crawled over to his mother’s lifeless body. He couldn’t believe she was gone, and he would do anything to bring her back. He took her into his arms and held her, ignoring the blood seeping into his clothes.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he said with a choked sob. “I’m so sorry.”

1

SEPTEMBER, 2015

James pushed the key in the old lock and jiggled it until he felt the door give. His apartment was dark and smelled musky, as most basements did. The old lady who had rented it to him two months ago seemed nice enough, and it was a lot better than sleeping at the sketchy motel in town that he'd called home for the past few years. He dealt with the basement's leaking walls, bugs, mold, mice, and smells by simply ignoring them as much as possible. Most of his time was spent at work anyway, so it didn't really matter. It was just a place to sleep. Besides, having a nicer place wouldn't solve any of his problems. His grandparents had had plenty of money, and it hadn't brought them happiness. It had only caused problems for them and his parents. He was fine living just as he was.

He climbed onto his mattress that rested directly on the cold concrete floor without bothering to remove his clothes first. He was exhausted from too many days of overtime as well as from too much stress by spending so many hours around his boss and coworkers. It wasn't that he didn't like people, they just tired him out. The work was simple, but dealing with work politics all day made him long for the solitude of his own place. The quieter, the better. In that way, he supposed, he lived up to the stereotype of being an accountant. Or at least that's what he called himself, since "accounts payable technician" didn't sound nearly as respectable.

His eyelids fluttered closed and he took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before slowly letting it out through his nose to the count of ten. A previous therapist had taught him how to do deep breathing exercises to help ground him and keep him calm, and for the most part they helped, but not always.

The sound of his ringing cell instantly brought him out of his semi-relaxed state, and he fumbled in the dark on the cold floor with his searching fingers until he found it and saw it was Mark. He had just met the man the previous week at the gym—in a futile attempt to get in shape and improve his health—and it felt a little strange that he would be calling him so late when they barely even knew each other. Of course, that was his own fault for even giving out his number, he reminded himself.

"Hello?" James said, making his voice sound sleepier than he really was. Hopefully Mark would take the hint, apologize for calling so late, and let him get back to his deep breathing exercises.

“James,” Mark said, his voice coming from what sounded like a tunnel inside a crowded football stadium. “I’m over here at the Darby and wanted to see if you wanted to come join me for a beer or two.”

James softly sighed, not wanting to appear rude, but he really didn’t want to have to get up and drive two cities over to the Darby in order to have watered-down beer with someone he barely knew in a seedy bar that he didn’t even like.

“I don’t know...I’m pretty beat,” James said, trying to give him the hint without being outright rude about it. He liked Mark well enough, but he’d had enough socializing for one day and needed to recharge. Some folks at work had invited him to go barhopping with them tonight, but he had turned them down easily enough, like he always did. Honestly he didn’t understand why they kept asking, even after giving them the same polite response over the last three years.

For some reason it was harder to turn down Mark, though. James didn’t have a lot of friends, so he kind of felt obligated to reciprocate when someone showed him any interest—like he would only get so many chances before the universe stopped trying altogether. He couldn’t handle an entire group, but just one person was almost bearable. Not enjoyable, but bearable. Besides, one night out on the town with him would cure Mark for sure of ever asking again. He knew he wasn’t exactly a bundle of fun to be around even on a good night, which tonight was not. He would meet Mark for a beer, leave soon afterward, and never be bothered by him again. It would be an investment in his deep-breathing future. A little pain now for no pain later. James sighed.

“Come on, man, it’s just a few beers. It’ll do you some good to get out and let loose for a while. Anyway, it’s only nine o’clock on a Friday night! You can’t possibly be sleeping already, right?”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a half hour,” James said, resigned to his fate. He forced himself up and turned on the lamp so he wouldn’t trip over something. He debated changing his shirt before he left, but in the end decided against it. Why bother? It wasn’t like he was going out on a date.

He brushed his teeth and ran a comb through his hair, noticing that there were more grays at his temples than there had been last week. At thirty-three, he wasn’t prepared to already be turning gray. He looked in the mirror at his blue eyes and what remained of his black hair and wondered—not for the first time—who he took after in his family.

Several people were walking in to the house as James walked out. The upstairs tenant often held loud parties on the weekends, so he wasn’t surprised. He wondered if the old woman knew about the parties and if she approved of that kind of activity in her decrepit house. He sidestepped a trio of half-dressed women on the sidewalk who were laughing and heading up to the house, and walked around the corner to where he had parked his car on the street. One of the perks of living in a house on a corner lot was having more choices of where to park. He always parked farther away on the weekends, just in case Dwight held another party.

As he pulled away from the curb, and saw the number of people heading up to the house, he had to acknowledge that he probably wouldn’t have gotten any sleep anyway if he had stayed at home. Of course, that wasn’t the point of staying home. A night alone in a noisy house was better than a night out—anywhere.

The drive to the Darby took only fifteen minutes at this late hour. He parked his white Escort in the gravel drive before walking inside and finding Mark easily enough at the bar, running his hand through his sandy-colored short hair while he eyed the ladies near him. His gray eyes

sparkled with optimism, and James couldn't help but laugh. Although he supposed women would find Mark somewhat attractive, he wasn't quite tall enough or built enough to stand out. He looked more like James, average, which is why they had clicked so easily when they'd initially met at the fitness center.

James couldn't help rubbing it in so he yawned as he approached Mark, who rolled his eyes in response.

"Hey, man, it's good to see you. I'm glad you came out."

James smiled at him, and Mark handed him a beer. He took a big swig, and placed the mug back on the bar before looking around to survey the crowd.

"Don't look now," Mark said, "but you've got a pretty one eying you up and down—and she has been ever since you walked in." Mark leaned against the bar and gave James a huge grin, like he had just handed him a winning lottery ticket.

"I am not interested," he said while shaking his head, not even bothering to look at whoever it was that was supposedly gawking at him.

"What do you mean you're not interested? Of course you're interested—you can't fool me, man," Mark said with a laugh. "Just look at her! She's beautiful."

James threw a quick glance over his shoulder and caught the woman's eye, causing her grin to spread into a wide smile. He groaned when he saw her get up and move her way over to him, the scent of her familiar perfume overpowering him before she was even in earshot.

"Hi, James," the woman said, smiling in mock shyness while twirling her hair.

"Hi, Vicki," James said in response, giving her a smile, but not wanting to encourage her.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, James?" Mark asked with one eyebrow raised.

"No," was James's only response, causing Mark to laugh.

"All right, man. I can take a hint," Mark said, moving farther down the bar to give James some privacy.

Vicki gave him an intrigued look, obviously deciding to let it pass.

"So you canceled on the barhopping and decided to just come here instead?"

"Yeah, and it looks like you did too."

"I'm actually meeting someone here, but he's late and you're here and.... Are you wearing the same thing you wore to work today?"

James looked down at his clothes, wondering what the big deal was.

"Yes, why?"

Vicki looked at him and shook her head.

"Why don't you buy me a drink?" she suggested, moving closer to him.

"It looks like you already have one." He pointed to her cosmopolitan, now sitting on the bar.

"Yeah, but I think I'd like something stronger now." She moved closer still and placed her outstretched hot hand on his thigh, holding it there like a threat or a promise—he wasn't sure which.

"I'll be buying your drinks, darlin', so tell this loser to get lost." The voice came from a huge man with a full mustache who was wearing a ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots, and had a beer gut hanging over his over-sized silver belt buckle. The man looked ridiculous and James had to hold in a laugh at the sight of him.

"Is something funny, little man? I'd be happy to wipe that stupid grin right off your face, if you'd like."

James could tell that the man had obviously started drinking long before entering the bar,

and was possibly already flat-out drunk.

“Leave him alone, Clint. He’s just a guy from work. I was just saying hi.” Vicki rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders as she moved away with the cowboy to a table in the corner of the bar.

James watched them go, and glanced around at the other patrons, suddenly feeling like he was being watched. He didn’t see anyone looking his way, but he couldn’t shake the feeling. It unnerved him and he felt a shiver down his spine.

Mark moved back to James’s side at Vicki’s departure, looking over at her questioningly.

“She’s just a girl from the office—a sales rep at the software company where I work,” James said, trying to explain before the questions started. “Her name’s Vicki.”

“Just a girl, my ass—that chick wants you.”

“Whatever. She’s married, and she flirts with everyone at the office.”

“Is that her husband?” Mark asked, gesturing to the large goon sitting with Vicki.

“No, it’s not.”

“Well, if she’s giving it away, you should take advantage of it.”

“No thanks, I’m not interested in her.”

“Well, then, who are you interested in?” Mark looked genuinely concerned, as if James’s love life was somehow the biggest problem facing the country and he was determined to solve it.

“I’m not interested in anyone right now, honestly. I can’t even handle my own issues, never mind someone else’s.”

“What do you mean? Is everything all right?”

James immediately regretted saying anything at all. He hated having to talk about himself.

“Nothing—it’s nothing. I’ve been feeling a little off lately, that’s all.” James didn’t feel the need to go into detail about his recent relapse.

Mark just stared at him, obviously not willing to let him off the hook. James hated it when he allowed conversations to steer in this direction, hating having to explain himself. He had issues, sure, but didn’t everybody? Having anxiety wasn’t so strange these days. Lots of people struggled with anxiety. Still, he despised talking about it. It always made him feel weak. He hated feeling weak.

“Are you seeing someone—a therapist, I mean?” Mark said, with true caring evident in his voice.

James was taken aback, both by the kindness and sincerity of the thoughtful question. Most people he would hang out with from time to time over the years only made fun of him, never tried to help him. He wasn’t sure how to answer.

“I’ve been to a couple over the years,” he replied, giving a rendition of the truth but still purposefully being vague. “Some have been more helpful than others.”

“My sister had some issues a couple of years ago, and she loved her therapist,” Mark said, speaking softly so no one could hear them. “If you’d like, I can get you the number?”

“Okay,” James said, trying to shut the door on the conversation rather than agreeing to anything in particular. He hated that he needed help. He wished he could feel better on his own, without support. He felt weak because of it. He longed to feel at peace, devoid of stress, but that wasn’t his reality. He knew that if he did want to feel better, he would need to seriously consider Mark’s suggestion. It might be time to check in with a professional, since it had been a long time since his last session.

“Good,” Mark said. “That’s settled, then. So now, we party.” He gave James a big grin and

held up his beer to invite a clink of mugs, demanding James's acquiescence in the evening's festivities to come.

He inwardly sighed. It was going to be a long night.

2

One eye opened, then the other. James squinted at the light streaming in from the tiny basement window at the top of the wall, and groaned because it felt like it was piercing his brain. This headache was one of the worst he'd ever had. He dragged the flimsy blanket over his head and rolled over, shutting out the day. He wasn't sure he would be ready for any source of light anytime soon.

Light... The sun was shining.

James sat up suddenly, throwing the blanket to the side and staring at the digital clock readout on the DVD-player, wide-eyed. 11:22 a.m. He was late—very late.

He didn't remember if he had set his alarm on his phone last night before falling into bed. He didn't remember going to bed at all. He didn't even remember coming home. How much had he drunk?

His fingers fumbled beside the bed, searching once more for his cell. What his fingers grasped, however, was a piece of silky cloth. He lifted it to see what it was and was horrified to see that it was a pair of women's panties—red silk panties. James threw them in disgust, letting out a half-yell in the process. He was scared to look, but forced himself to lift the blankets and check his bed. He sighed in relief when he found it empty. He knew he had gotten drunk last night, but even drunk he wouldn't have come home with anyone. He needed to have a word with the landlord about Dwight's parties. Things were getting way out of hand if they were somehow infiltrating his private, personal space, and the old lady needed to do something about it.

The cell was just out of reach when he grabbed for it, noticing he had three missed calls, all from Mr. Buchanan's number. He didn't bother to check the voicemail messages. He had agreed to work on Saturday because it was the end of the month and there were lots of invoices to process before the month-end closing. He didn't do it for the money, and he didn't do it for the camaraderie, of course—especially because he was the only one who showed up on the weekends anyway. He mainly agreed to it every month because it gave him something to do, and also because it was fun to work in an empty office. He could get more work done on one Saturday than three regular work days.

But he had never been late to work before. Never.

The shower was ice cold on his already cold skin, forcing him to wake up. He quickly shampooed his hair and threw some soap gel under his arms before jumping back out and toweling off. He threw on the first shirt he could find, and his jeans, and then ran out the door...before remembering his plan and turning back around and going back in.

Dwight was sitting on the front porch, wearing a robe, drinking coffee, gazing at the darkening, angry-looking clouds when James ran past. He aimed for the coffee cup, but didn't quite make it.

"Tell your guests to stay out of my place next time, please," James said, sprinting down the walk to his car and leaving his roommate with a puzzled expression on his face and a pair of red silk panties in his lap.

The drive to the office took nineteen minutes on an average work day in rush hour, and fourteen minutes on most Saturdays, so James felt proud when he clocked the trip at eight minutes door to door on this particular morning.

The adrenaline coursed through his veins from the lack of sleep, the abrupt awakening, the hangover, the crazy-quick drive in, and now because someone was sitting on the front wall, smoking a cigarette next to the building's main door. He couldn't recognize who it was, but there was something oddly familiar about him nonetheless. And he was staring at James.

It wasn't too unusual to have someone waiting at the door, since sometimes employees forgot their fobs, but something about this particular man was making his skin crawl.

He slowly got out of the car, methodically closing and locking the door before starting the walk up to the entrance, feeling scattered raindrops on his head and shoulders as he made his way to the front door. As he neared the guy on the wall he took in his appearance, trying to place him. He wasn't an employee—that much was certain. That's when James's breath caught in his throat.

The man was a little bit older-looking than James last remembered him, but for the most part hadn't changed much. James stopped several yards away and they simply stared at one another until the realization hit and time stood still. Just like that, it was sixteen years previous, and he was watching the man—*this* man, who was now sitting on the wall at his job—squeeze the life out of James's father.

His throat closed up and he felt like he couldn't breathe. He was dizzy and his vision blurred. He turned and ran as fast as he could, back to his car, fumbling with his keys as he tried to unlock it and start it. He threw the gear into reverse by mistake before successfully putting it into drive and flooring it, leaving tire marks on the parking lot as he squealed out.

This couldn't be happening. James hadn't told a single soul—ever. There was no reason for Alistair to be here looking for him. He hadn't done anything wrong!

James shook his head to clear his thoughts and his vision. His breathing slowly returned to normal, but he kept checking the rear-view mirror to make sure he wasn't being followed. As soon as he felt sure he wasn't, he pulled over into a busy shopping strip mall and found a spot to park. The first call he made was to his boss, thankfully getting his voicemail, where he left a message saying he was sorry, but he was sick and wouldn't be able to come in, but he would see him first thing on Monday morning. Surely the man on the wall had been an apparition, hadn't he?

The second call was to Mark. In case he hadn't been.

The downpour obscured his vision as he tried to peer through the windshield to find the

address Mark had given him. He knew this part of town pretty well, and had a general idea of where he needed to go, but the rain wasn't helping. He had to make U-turns several times before he found the right parking lot, but was grateful that it was a weekend so there had been hardly any traffic and the lot was virtually empty. As with most places in downtown, the parking was located behind the building with the front on-curb spaces reserved for loading and unloading and emergency vehicles only.

The small office building itself was rundown and falling apart, and James wondered if it was even safe to go inside. It was just outside downtown, in an older part of Ainsbury Park, where pretty much everything was dilapidated and in some state of disrepair. He supposed it fit his circumstances just fine.

He walked up the steps to the double front doors and was surprised to find them unlocked. The sign out front indicated there were lawyers, tax accountants, and financial advisors using this building so it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for them to hold weekend meetings, he imagined.

There was a handwritten sign by the door just inside the hallway at 1A that said NATALIE PRUITT, M.D. James looked at it in confusion, wondering if he was in the correct place. Mark had told him the psychiatrist's name was Nat, but he had just assumed it was a man. All of his previous therapists had been men, and he wasn't sure if he was comfortable working with a woman. In fact, he was pretty sure he was not comfortable with it at all. He was uncomfortable around most women, and he only assumed it would be the same with a therapist. Plus, he didn't like the fact that she didn't look established. What doctor used a handwritten sign? And why wasn't she in some fancy new office in a downtown high-rise?

Once he made up his mind, he turned to leave the way he had come. He would ask someone else for a recommendation, or he would call his insurance company and ask them for local listings. He opened the main front door and held it for a woman who walked in while carrying a moving box on her hip and holding a large brown-tipped fern.

"James?" the woman said, looking up at him expectantly while shifting the box to keep it from falling. She looked to be in her early to mid-thirties, if that, with silky, long brown hair and striking green eyes. She wore a cream-colored skirt and blouse over her trim figure, and black high heels on bare feet—like she could quickly change into football-watching-on-the-couch mode at a moment's notice. The woman was striking, and James was left mute.

"Would you mind helping me with this?" she said, handing him the plant without waiting for an answer. Her hair was wet and her blouse as well, and he didn't have the heart to run out on her now that she had obviously gone to so much trouble to meet with him. He would stick around for this appointment, and then find someone else—a man—for next time. He held the door for her while holding on to her gangly plant, and followed her back into the small hallway to wait behind her while she unlocked her office door.

The small room was sparse, but well lit due to its corner location. There were two large windows, one on the front and one on the side, that provided much needed light on the dreary space, even on such an overcast day. A large desk took up most of the office, with a large bookcase behind it along the back wall. The rest of the room was empty, with just a few scattered boxes. James put the plant on the corner of the desk and walked behind it to see the pictures she had placed on the shelves of the bookcase. There was a large matted frame that showed Natalie Pruitt with an attractive blond man, and both their arms were around a tiny blond boy with great big green eyes.

“What have you found, James?” she asked, startling him. He turned around and made his way back to stand beside her desk, not exactly sure where he was supposed to sit.

“Oh, I was just looking at your family picture. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude, Dr. Pruitt.”

“Please, call me Nat. And you weren’t intruding.” She straightened up from moving some boxes around, sliding out a chair from behind a couple boxes that had been set in the corner.

“I’m sorry, this folding chair will have to do for today until I can get the rest of my things.” She set it in front of her desk before going around to her large leather executive chair and sat down. She pulled open a drawer and took out an elastic band, putting her damp hair up into a high ponytail. James watched, entranced, as it revealed the angles of her cheekbones and the length of her graceful neck. He averted his gaze, not wanting to stare.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice today, Dr.—Nat.” James felt flustered, and fiddled with his fingers in his lap.

“It’s no problem. I would have been here anyway—as you can see, I’m moving in—so the only difference is I’m wearing a skirt.” She gave him a wide smile, and James couldn’t help but grin back at her easy-going manner. She was disarming in the best possible way. He felt himself relax, just a bit, especially because he knew it was only for one visit.

“So James, what brings you in to see me today?” She opened a notebook on her desk and placed a pen on top of it before leaning forward, waiting for him to speak.

“I have PTSD from something that happened when I was a teenager, and lately I’ve been dealing with intense anxiety and some...some paranoia.” James already knew his issues, he just needed help in dealing with them.

She reached her hand across the desk toward him and looked into his eyes. “I’m glad you reached out to me today. I’m sure we can find a way to help you feel better.” She paused, pulling her hand back and picking up her pen. “Now, what types of therapy have you tried so far, and what medications?”

James immediately knew, right then and there, that she was the one—his forever therapist. Her first question hadn’t been to ask what had happened to him when he was seventeen, like all his previous therapists had, forcing him to relive the trauma by retelling it before he even felt comfortable with them. Her first thought had been to focus on how she could help him feel better. The rest could come later.

He never wanted to leave.

3

AUGUST 22, 1982

“Frank,” Brenda said in a whisper near his ear. The pain swelled in her belly and around her torso, gripping her lower back and making her feel like she was turning inside out. She closed her eyes and groaned. “Wake up, please.”

There was no response from the sleeping man, her husband, who was still snoring loudly in their bed. The lingering scent of cigarettes and alcohol on his clothes hung heavy in the air, made worse by the lack of air conditioning in their small two-bedroom, rundown house. The open bedroom window provided no relief, the oppressive heat of the August night squeezing the oxygen from her lungs before it had a chance to fill them.

She paused, wondering if she could do it on her own—a natural birth—even though that hadn’t been her plan. As quickly as the idea came, she pushed it aside as absurd. There was no way she could push a baby into the world without painkillers and the help of trained doctors and nurses. No way.

The contraction finally eased, leaving her slightly breathless and better able to think clearly. She took two deep breaths to relax. She didn’t want to wake Frank if she didn’t have to. She knew how he could be. The last thing she wanted was a confrontation at this early hour.

There was no way she could drive herself to the hospital, though. She could barely fit behind the wheel, and couldn’t climb up into the truck on her own anyway. And even if she found a way, as soon as a contraction hit her while on the road she would probably veer off and hit a tree. It wasn’t safe to drive in her condition. Plus Frank didn’t like her driving his truck, especially if she was going to mess it up with “bodily fluids,” as he called it.

She decided against calling 911 for help, since Frank would get mad at that, too. If the ambulance came out, they’d get a bill for \$500 that they’d have no way to pay. At least at the hospital they could get on a payment plan.

Calling her parents was not an option either. There was no way she was going to give them a reason to say ‘I told you so’. She could still hear the argument from six months ago, the loud angry voices of her parents ringing in her ears. Her father had warned her that she would be cut off—disowned—if she insisted on carrying on with that ‘loser,’ as her father called Frank. She had told them that she didn’t need them in her life if they couldn’t accept the man she loved. Since then, she’d done everything possible to hide the extent of her eventual misery from them.

She had to keep up the front that everything was perfectly happy at home. They couldn't know that they'd been right—she wasn't happy, and he was not a good man to her.

With all other options crossed off, Frank was her only hope for getting help. She had to make him understand that somehow.

“Frank?” she said, louder this time.

He stirred just as another contraction tore at her, causing her to lose her window of opportunity, rendering her mute from the pain. She clawed at the bed linens, doubled over in agony, for what felt like an eternity. She could feel sweat dripping down her face, neck, and shoulders. Her hand shook as she reached out to touch him on the shoulder—from pain or fear, she wasn't sure. Maybe both.

“Frank,” she practically yelled this time.

He sat straight up, a tense and wild look in his eyes, searching for the intruder or fire or whatever emergency had caused the disturbance. He noticed her sitting beside him before casually laying back down and closing his eyes.

“I need you to take me to the hospital,” she said, urgency in her voice as she held her swollen belly.

“I'm not going anywhere,” he said, rolling over away from her.

“I'm in labor, Frank,” she said, trying again to reason with him.

“I don't give a shit,” he muttered into the pillow, muffling his words, although they rang clear and true to her ears. “It's Saturday night. I just got home a couple of hours ago. I'm still drunk. I'm tired. I'm in my fucking bed and I'm not getting out of it. So shut the fuck up and go away.”

Now wasn't the time to question her life choices, but she felt compelled to examine—once again—her reasons for staying with him. Being all of nineteen, she really didn't have a lot of options. She didn't have a job, so she couldn't afford to be out on her own. She hadn't even finished high school, so she had no education to help her get a good job. She was no longer welcome at her parents' home, and sex with Frank was mind-blowing. Maybe that was a bad reason to stay with someone, but it was all she had and she clung to it now.

The pregnancy had been an accident. Frank felt so damn good inside her so the thought of telling him to stop, or to pull out, was unthinkable, really. He was so passionate, strong, and domineering in bed, she melted with just one look from him.

Brenda glanced over at the digital clock on the dresser across the room. 3:47 a.m. She was on her own, and there was no one she could call on for help. She had to act *now* before it was too late.

She slowly hefted herself off the bed, both from the need to stay as quiet as possible and because of the effort it required to move, and felt her way over to the pitch-black closet where she haphazardly grabbed whatever random things her hands fell upon. A pillowcase, a few towels, and an old T-shirt. As she passed Frank's side of the bed on her way out the door, she also swiped his half-empty bottle of whiskey from his nightstand.

She walked down the short hallway, stopping mid-way when another contraction hit her that took her breath away. She gasped for air, hunching over and leaning against the wall for support. The urge to push was overpowering, but she didn't want to have the baby in the hallway. She stood up straight and put the bottle of whiskey to her lips, taking a long pull and feeling the burn as it slid down her throat and chest. She gasped another breath before taking another long pull, drinking as much of the strong amber liquid as she could before the pain came again, urging her down the hall to a safe place. The spasm tore through her so she gritted

her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut to keep from crying out, falling to her knees with the force of the contraction. She couldn't hold back any longer. She had to push.

She crawled to the kitchen, pausing to pant over the stained, dirty linoleum floor. She didn't know what position she should be in for this. All she knew was that she could no longer move. She was on all fours so that's where she would have to stay. She pushed a towel beneath her just before another contraction hit along with a primal urge to push. She grabbed the pillowcase to stuff as much of it as she could into her mouth, screaming into it as the pain racked her body, screaming until there was nothing left except the memory of air in her lungs. She pushed as hard as she could until she saw spots before her eyes and felt dizzy. She pushed until she felt a small *thump* on the towel.

James Davis was born at home, on the kitchen floor, at 4:32 a.m. according to the clock on the microwave above Brenda's head. The baby cried right away, loud and strong, and Brenda wrapped him in the inside-out AC/DC T-shirt before pulling him to her chest to quieten him while she tied off the cord with Frank's shoelace. Despite the messy entrance, the baby arrived no worse for wear, and she instantly loved him with a fierceness she previously never would have understood possible.

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