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LYING BESIDE YOU



SPHERE

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'Tell me what you can't forget, and I'll tell you who you are.'

— Julie Buntin, *Marlena*

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Cyrus

If I could tell you one thing about my brother it would be this: two days after his nineteenth birthday, he killed our parents and our twin sisters because he heard voices in his head. As defining events go, nothing else comes close for Elias, or for me.

I have often tried to imagine what went through his mind on that cool autumn evening, when our neighbours began closing their curtains to the coming night and the streetlights shone with misty yellow halos. What did the voices say? What possible words could have made him do the things he did?

I have tortured myself with what-ifs and maybes. What if I hadn't stopped to buy hot chips on my way home from football practice? What if I hadn't propped my bike outside Ailsa Piper's house, hoping to glimpse her in her garden, or coming home from her netball practice? What if I had pedalled faster and arrived home sooner? Could I have stopped him, or would I be dead too?

I am the boy who survived, the one who hid in the garden shed, crouching among the tools, smelling the kerosene and paint fumes and grass clippings, while sirens echoed through the streets of Nottingham.

In my nightmares, I always wake as I step into the kitchen, wearing muddy football socks. My mother is lying on the floor amid the frozen peas, which had spilled across the white tiles. Chicken stock is bubbling on the stove and her famous paella had begun to stick in the heavy-based pan.

I miss my mum the most. I feel guilty about playing favourites, but nobody is around to criticise my choices, except for Elias, and he doesn't get to choose. Ever.

Dad died in the sitting room, crouching in front of the DVD player because one of the twins had managed to get a disc stuck in the machine. He raised one hand to protect himself and lost two fingers and a thumb, before the knife severed his spine.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, Esme and April were doing their homework or playing games. April, older by twenty minutes, and therefore bossier, was usually the first to do everything, but it was April, dressed in a unicorn onesie, who ran towards the knife, trying to protect her sister. Esme had to be dragged from under her bed and died with a rug bunched beneath her body and a ukulele in her hand.

Many of these details have the power to close my throat or wake me screaming, but as snapshots they are fading. My memories aren't as vivid as they once were. The colours. The smells. The sounds. The fear.

For example, I can no longer remember what colour dress my mother was wearing, or which of the twins had her hair in braids that week. (Esme and April took it in turns to help their teachers differentiate between them, or maybe to confuse them further.)

And I can't remember if Dad had opened a bottle of home brew – a six o'clock ritual in our household – when he uncapped his latest batch with a brass Winston Churchill bottle opener. With great ceremony, he would pour the 'amber nectar' into a pint glass, holding it up to the light to study the colour and opacity. And when he drank, he would swish that first sip around in his mouth, sucking in air like a wine connoisseur,

saying things like, 'Bit malty . . . a little cloudy . . . a tad early . . . half decent . . . buttery . . . quenching . . . perfect in another week.'

It is these small details that elude me. I can't remember if I knocked the mud off my football boots, or if I chained up my bike, or if I closed the side gate. I *can* remember stopping to wash the salt from my hands and to gulp down water, because Mum hated me spoiling my appetite by eating junk food so close to dinnertime. In the same breath, she'd complain about me having 'hollow legs' and 'eating her out of house and home'.

I miss her cooking. I miss her embarrassing hugs in public. I miss her spitting on tissues and wiping food off my face. I miss her trying to slick down my cowlick. I miss her nagging me about telling ghost stories to the twins, or leaving the toilet seat up, or the cap off the toothpaste.

I had nobody to nag me after the murders. My grandparents didn't have the heart. They were grieving too. I became the boy who was pitied and pointed at and whispered about. Befriended. Bullied. Cosseted. Counselled. The boy who did drugs and cut himself and turned up drunk at school. A hard child to love. Not a child at all, not after what I'd seen.

Monday morning, at a quarter to ten, and I'm sitting in the reception area of Rampton Secure Hospital, an hour's drive north of Nottingham. In fifteen minutes, a panel of three people – a judge, a consultant psychiatrist and a layperson, will hear an application from my brother to be released. It has been twenty years since my parents and sisters died. I am now thirty-three. Elias is thirty-eight. The boy is a man. The brother wants to come home.

For years, I have told people that I want what's best for Elias, without knowing exactly what that means and whether it extends to setting him free. As a forensic psychologist, I understand mental illness. I should be able to separate the person from the act – to hate the sin but forgive the sinner.

I have read stories about forgiveness. People who have visited killers in prison, offering sympathy and absolution. They say things like, 'You took a piece out of my heart that can never be replaced, but I forgive you.'

One woman, a mother in her sixties, lost her only son, who was stabbed to death outside a party. After the jury convicted the killer, a boy of sixteen, she forgave the teenager. Doubled over in shock, she kept repeating, 'I just hugged the man that murdered my son.' In the next breath, she said, 'I felt something leave me. Instantly, I knew all the hatred and bitterness and animosity was gone.'

A better me, a kinder soul, an empath, a religious man, would show mercy and give Elias the pardon he seeks. Unconditionally. Without question or hesitation. I am not that man.

Dr Baillie swipes a security card and comes to collect me from the waiting room. He is Elias's case worker. Fiftyish, compact, stern, a psychiatrist with a short-trimmed beard and a greying ponytail that seems to be dragging his hairline higher up his forehead.

'How is it going?' I ask.

'It looks promising.'

For whom, I want to ask, but I know whose side Dr Baillie is on. He assumes I'm with him. Maybe I am.

He waves to a security guard behind a Perspex screen. A door is unlocked and we are escorted along wide corridors that smell of pine-scented floor polish and phenol.

Rampton is one of three high-security psychiatric hospitals in England. According to the *Daily Mail*, it houses the 'worst of the worst', but reporters tend to focus on the high-profile patients, the 'rippers', 'butchers' and 'slashers' who make better clickbait than the bulk of inmates, being treated for personality or mood disorders; illnesses that don't involve a body count.

We have arrived at a large room where two dozen chairs, most of them empty, are set out in front of a long, polished table. A side door swings open. Elias enters. He is patted down

one final time, before being told to sit. He waves to me. Relief in his eyes.

We don't look like brothers. He has put on weight over the years – due to medications and inactivity – and his hair is now flecked with grey above his ears. He has a round, blotchy face, a thin mouth, and eyes that are brown and intelligent yet strangely vacant.

Today, he is wearing his best clothes, beige chinos and a neatly ironed white shirt, and I see comb marks in his lightly oiled hair. Straight lines, front to back.

I shuffle along the row of seats until I'm close enough to shake his damp hand.

'You came.'

'Of course. How are you?'

'Nervous.'

'Dr Baillie says you've done well so far.'

'I hope so.'

Elias glances anxiously at the main table and the three empty chairs.

Another door opens and three people enter. The panel. Two men and a woman. They take their seats. Each has a name badge, but they make a point of introducing themselves. The legal representative, Judge Aimes, is a small rather plump man in a pinstriped suit, with greying hair swept back to form a wave that covers a bald spot. The psychiatrist, Dr Steger, is wearing a business shirt, rolled to his elbows, and an MCC tie. His hair is spiked with gel, and he has a heavy silver bracelet instead of a wristwatch. The lay member of the panel, Mrs Sheila Haines, looks like my old kindergarten teacher and I can imagine her jollying along proceedings and suggesting a mid-morning 'fruit break'.

Everybody new in the room must be identified. Their eyes turn to me.

'I am Cyrus Haven. Elias's brother.'

'Are you his closest family?' asks the judge.

I'm his only family, I want to say, but that's not quite true. He still has grandparents, aunts, uncles and a handful of cousins, who have been remarkably silent for two decades. I doubt if being related to Elias is one of their dinner-party stories.

'I'm his nearest living relative,' I say, and immediately wish I'd used different words.

'Are you a medical doctor?' asks Mrs Haines.

'I'm a forensic psychologist.'

'How fascinating.'

Judge Aimes wants to move on. He addresses Elias.

'Have you been given any medication that might affect your ability to participate in these proceedings?'

'Only my usual drugs,' says Elias, in a voice that is louder than the occasion demands.

'What are you taking?' asks the psychiatrist.

'Clozapine.'

'Do you know what would happen if you stopped taking your medication?'

'I would get sick again.' He adds quickly, 'But I'm better now.'

Judge Aimes looks up from his notes. 'We have received reports from two consultant psychiatrists, as well as heard oral submissions from Dr Baillie and the ward nurse and two resident psychiatrists. Have you been shown these statements?'

Elias nods.

'Do you have any questions?'

'No, sir.'

'This is your opportunity to make your case, Elias. Tell us what you'd like to happen now.'

Elias pushes back his chair and is about to stand when the judge says he should stay seated. Elias takes a piece of paper from his pocket.

'I would like to express my thanks to the panel for this opportunity,' he says, blinking at the page, as though he's forgotten his glasses. Does he wear them? It's been years since

I've seen him read anything apart from the comic books and graphic novels I bring him when I visit. Dad needed reading glasses when he turned forty and I expect it will happen to me.

Elias continues. 'I know what I did, and I know why it happened. I am a schizophrenic. What I experienced that day – what I saw and heard – the voices, the hallucinations – none of that was real. But I did unspeakable things to my family. Unforgivable things.'

He looks quickly at me and away again.

'I have to live with that stain on my soul. I broke many hearts – including my own – and every day I pray to God for His forgiveness.'

This is also new information, although I've noticed him dropping Bible quotes into our conversations on my fortnightly visits to Rampton. He wipes perspiration from his top lip.

'I have been in this place for more than seven thousand days and in all that time I have never left the grounds to visit the shops, or see a movie, or walk along a beach or ride a bike. I want to decorate a Christmas tree and wrap presents and go on holidays. I want to live a normal life, to make friends and get a job and meet a girl.'

I picture him practising this speech for weeks, looking at his reflection in the anti-break mirror.

'What job would you do?' asks the judge.

'I would continue to study law. One day I hope to be sitting where you are, helping people.'

'That's very noble,' says Mrs Haines.

Dr Steger seems less impressed. 'Almost half of all patients we release fail to keep taking their medication. Eighty per cent of them have relapsed within two years.'

'That wouldn't happen to me,' says Elias.

'How can we be sure?'

'I have worked on a recovery plan. I have coping skills.'

'Where would you live?'

'With my brother, Cyrus.'

The panel members look to me. I nod. Dry-mouthed.

'Do you have any questions for Elias, Dr Haven?' asks the judge.

Elias suddenly looks flustered. He didn't expect me to speak.

'How did it begin?' I ask. 'The voices.'

He blinks at me, as though unsure of the question. The silence fills every corner of the room and rises like water making my ears pop.

He finally speaks. 'There was only one. I thought it was my imagination at first.'

'What did it say?'

'I didn't think it was talking to me. It never said my name.'

'What did it say?'

'It . . . it . . . talked about someone else. "Can he stay awake all night?" "Can he skip school?" "Can he steal money from Dad's wallet?"'

'Was the voice telling you to do these things?'

'I didn't think so – not at first.'

'Why did you listen?'

'I thought it would make the voice go away.'

Nothing Elias has said is new. It has been documented, discussed and analysed. He is a case study now, taught to university students who are studying psychiatry and psychology and sociology.

'Do you ever think about them?' I ask.

Again, he blinks at me.

'Mum and Dad. Esme and April. Do you ever think about them?'

He shrugs.

'Why not?'

'It upsets me.'

'Did you love them?'

'I was sick. I did a bad thing.'

'Yes, but did you love them?'

'Of course.'

'Do you love me?'

'I barely know you,' he whispers.

'I appreciate your honesty.'

His eyes have filled with tears. 'I'm sorry.'

'What are you sorry for?'

'For what I did.'

'And now you've changed?'

He nods.

I glance at the judge and tell him I'm finished.

'Well, let's take a break,' he says, addressing Elias. 'We shall have a decision for you shortly.'