

## *Do You Remember?*

Remember, Matt? Remember what happened?

You do, you know you do. You just don't want to. You're the only one in this whole place who can recall his darkness, and you just hate that.

They try to take away the screams. They try to erase the blood. They want to make you forget your sins. The darkest demons trapped within your soul.

But they can't.

You live day after day, with the pain, the sorrow, the regret. You don't get to have the mercy of forgetting, and instead must know that with every second you breathe, others do not have that luxury because of you.

What's even the point?

You can't be changed. They think they're hitting a breakthrough with the inmates, yourself included, but there's an exception among the group. Among the wicked, screwed up minds that are being erased, yours is allowed to stay, unaffected by their new methods.

Mixed within the blank slates of the asylum, you're a colorful blur of red and darkness and destruction. You don't want to be, that much is clear, but you're forced to be. Perhaps that's your punishment. Perhaps you're not allowed to forget because of how truly evil you are.

You're so lost, so ravaged by the darkness inside you, that you can't possibly hope to ever be changed. Somehow fate, in it's own twisted way, has given you what you deserve. Not death, not losing your memories, but instead having to be stuck living with yourself.

You are your own punishment.

## Chapter 1: Welcome to the Asylum

“Matthew?”

I turn my head. Staring right into the round glasses upon the old man's face, I return his look of confusion. “Yes?”

“I asked you a question, Matthew. You stared ahead, not even acknowledging me.” That'll happen. Visions or conversations with myself seem to constantly plague my messed up mind.

I give a grunt in return. “Sorry. What was the question?”

He stares at me a second, like he's studying a lab specimen. “I said, how is your life going in the asylum?”

I let out a laugh, “Oh, it's *wonderful!*” I smile at him, the biggest, most enthusiastic smile I can muster, “It's the life I always dreamt for myself!”

“Matthew, sarcasm is not going to help you. I need you to talk to me, openly and honestly. Otherwise, this treatment is for nothing.”

I sigh, “You think this really does me any good? Talking to an ancient old man, about how screwed up I am in the head? Because trust me, I'm already aware of that, and don't particularly feel like talking about it with anyone.”

This man, if he can even be called that, has been trying to crack me for the past month I've been in here. But I don't give him much. I know they have more forceful ways of getting me to talk, but they seem to hold out hope that'll I'll break eventually. But how does this man expect me to spill my soul to him, when he won't even tell me his name? I've told him so little that I've only received the shot three times.

The shot that's supposed to make me forget.

Unfortunately for me, it doesn't work though. Not that they know that.

“But, Matthew, I *can* help you. I just need you to open up to me! Just tell me something, anything, and I promise I'll help.”

I shake my head, “No one can help me.”

“Well then perhaps we can talk about how you came to be here?”

The sarcastic smile I wear, instantly falls off my face. “No.” I say.

“And why not?” he asks, a smile playing at the edges of his face, knowing this is my weak area. The area that I can't bear to talk about it, but at the same time, can't ever not talk about it. The memories too strong to be kept inside the far recesses of my mind. I can try all I want, but they break out of me, hurting me and anyone in their path.

“Because I said no,” I reply back, my voice void of any emotion. I will not let this man break me. He will not make me relive that pain.

He looks a bit irritated at this point, and uncrosses his legs. He closes the notebook he had been holding and places it on his desk behind him, then turns to look at me, resting on his knees.

“Fine, Matthew. Let’s call it a day. Maybe I’ll get something out of you tomorrow.”

I don’t give any response, but immediately stand. I turn and head to the door, grateful to leave the dusty, suffocating room. As I pull the door open some, the doctor calls to me once more, “Oh, but Mr.Barstow?”

I move my head back slightly in his direction, pointed down at the ground. It’s just enough to let him know I heard him. “I think tomorrow we’ll really delve into your past.”

I laugh right at him, and slam the door.

My past is something I never want to delve into. It’s a dark past, filled with pain and poor decisions, and pure misery. Over my month here at the asylum, and my time leading up to this point, I’ve managed to suppress it. I hide it deep inside, where I hope it can never come out and unleash it’s fury on me. The one problem is that if I’m forced to talk about it, it’s not easy to hide it all. If somebody pushes me, and pushes me, those memories will surface. They will surface and rear their ugly head at me, tormenting me in unimaginable ways. As long as I can avoid the questions and prods of that man in there, I can keep myself under control.

But honestly, I don’t know what will set me off. My past . . . it’s not a good one. I killed. That’s all I can really manage to think about, without having a breakdown. I killed, and I did some very bad things. Things that will haunt me for the rest of my time on Earth.

Not to mention that I’m classified as mentally insane.

Currently I reside in Dr.Warren’s Home for the Mentally Ill. Sounds lovely, doesn’t it? It’s a very nice mental asylum, I’ll give it that. Everything’s decorated, and new, and shiny. Completely and utterly *fake*, but nice. Most of the halls have nice, polished wood floors, with dark green walls. Ceilings high, with chandeliers placed intermittently throughout the whole building. Cells are what I like to describe as high class motel rooms. Nice, but not too nice. They’re connected to the main lounge area, the place where we all go when we’re not being questioned, drugged, or examined under machines.

It’s where the specimens go to play.

It’s fake too. TV’s, card tables, leather couches, ping pong tables, all meant to put us under a false sense of calmness. Like the curved steps leading up a level, that lead to wonderful rooms will make us forget we’re all murderers, and insane criminals. Like the giant, glass windows, overlooking the rolling hills of green and trees will make us forget that we’re all here to be studied.

It’s definitely not your average mental asylum.

But not for the reasons I've been listing.

No, see this place, it's got something even stranger with it. They've implemented a new program, a new way of running things. They've figured out how to take who we are. They take our memories, our past, our true selves.

They sit us down in the library-like therapy rooms, where we get to sit in comfy chairs, and spill ourselves to whichever doctor wants to talk to us on that particular day. Whatever they get out of us, whatever they manage to steal from our mouths, they erase it. I don't know how it works, but after a session they give you a single shot. It's like a little flu shot, painless and quick, and filled with a clear liquid. Whatever that liquid is made of though, it latches onto our memories. It latches onto the scenes we were just bringing up to our doctor.

And . . . it erases them.

Gone. Like they never existed. To us, anyway.

Now is this a bad thing? One could argue that it's brilliant. It erases the minds of the criminally insane, and rebirths them into a completely new person. If we don't have the memories that made us evil, and the ones of us doing the bad deeds we did, then we won't have any incentive to do it again, right?

I honestly don't know. I've thought about it, a lot, trust me. But I just can't seem to reach an answer. Sure, maybe it works, but it's not right. When you take these people's past selves, you're doing something that's incredibly inhumane. Yes, it's taking these evil, messed up personalities, but the people that result from that are completely fake. They're not really who they are. They're whatever the doctors tell them they are. And who knows, maybe the medicine doesn't really work. Those memories may not really be gone, and they could surface one random day, when an individual is back in society, living their fake life when they remember who they really are. And that could have some *very* deadly consequences.

But I can't really make a decision personally. Mostly because I'm immune.

Don't know how, I just am. I quickly realized what they were doing when I first got here, by talking to other inmates, and having them not remembering something they had told me about just a day earlier. When they started me on the treatment, I was incredibly nervous. I didn't want to lose myself. Yes, I'm not a good person, but . . . I didn't want what could be in me taken away without a chance.

I had to talk to my doctor though. This old guy, with old guy glasses, who always wears a nice, shiny white doctor's outfit. None of the other inmates know him, so I don't know why I'm so special to get him. But the first visit, they had me talk, just about little things, and gave me the shot. I kept running through everything I had said in my head when I left, trying with every ounce of my being to hold onto my memories. And as I did, I realized they weren't going away. They never did. Not the next day, not the one after that. And as the visits kept going, I just kept playing along. He questioned me about the

same things on the next visit, and I lied and acted like I had no idea what they were talking about. I also became resistant to their methods, to make it appear like they were taking my memories. For the time being, I've got them fooled. Hopefully it lasts.

All this thinking got me to the lounge area. The hall opens up into it, revealing the room in full. TV's placed along the walls, glass windows to the left, curved staircases leading to a second story hallway, and tables, couches, and chairs placed on rugs in the middle. It's fairly spacious, if it wasn't so crowded.

There's not a lot of us here at the asylum. At least for the men. Women are in another facility some miles away from this place. Can't be more than a few hundred of us here. We're obviously picked out specifically for this program, which I guess shows just how screwed up we all are.

Even more evidence to that, there's a bit of gang in this place. That's the type of people I live with. They're arrested, jailed, termed mentally ill, and placed among a select few of a new program for the very mentally ill, and what do they do? Form a gang, and push people around, because why not, right?

Leader of the gang is Martinez. We all go by first names mostly around here, and I honestly couldn't say that much for most. As for Martinez's self? Not much to tell. Basically what'd you'd expect the leader of a gang to look like. He's this big, mexican guy, with long hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a depressing little mustache. That wouldn't be too intimidating if it wasn't for his six foot five height, and incredibly muscular build. The guy's practically a giant. I try to avoid him mostly, but he seems to have a preference to aggravating me. Especially with my loud mouth cellmate.

He's a friend I guess, but annoying. He's this scrawny kid who talks a big game. John's his name. He yells insults at Martinez any chance he gets, and basically does all the right things to get himself killed. I want to protect the poor kid, but one of these days, Martinez is going to snap and I'm not going to be able to stop him.

As I enter the lounge, John shoots past me all of a sudden. "John?" I yell to him as he starts to climb the stairs.

He turns quickly, looking extremely worried, "Yeah?"

"Everything alright?"

"I, um . . . yeah. It's good. Everything's cool." He then turns, and without another word, races away, headed to our room I assume.

I watch him go, but I don't question it any further. I don't know what's wrong, but it's typically best to just let the kid go when he needs some space. I push the event out of my head, and wander around the room until I spot James.

James, aside from John, is about my only friend in this entire place. He's about my age, roughly in his early thirties, and honestly the nicest and most pure man in this building. He has PTSD. He was in the army, and it'd make him have rampages that he didn't remember afterwards. And one time it was just a really bad case, and . . . he killed

a guy. Just some random stranger that was next to him, when he was shopping at the local mall with his, at the time, girlfriend. It's a sad story, and I really do feel for him. Because he really is a good guy.

As I sit down, a bright smile blooms on his face, and he greets me, "Hey, Matt!"

I muster a smile and reply, "How goes the card game?" There's three other guys gathered at the table, playing a hand of poker. I've seen them all before, but don't know their names, or them personally at all.

"I am kickin' some serious butt." James exclaims, which is met with protests from the other three, but dies off into small laughter.

I sit there with them for awhile, catching up with James a bit here and there. He knows about what's going on around the asylum usually, and can tell some good stories. He doesn't have too much right now.

He tells me Albert has officially lost it. He's this really old man, who came in a few weeks ago. He was really skiddish and terrified of everything, and always muttered under his breath to himself. Proving James' claim, he points out Albert on the far side of the room. He's staring into the ground ahead, rocking back and forth, and muttering incoherent words. It's such a pitiful sight.

Other than that, James mentions Martinez is having talks of escape from this place. Says it's spreading through his gang, and anyone who would want to join them. Apparently he wants to talk to me about it at some point. At this news I shake my head and glance back at Martinez, who's a few couches over from our table, talking with a few of his people, occasionally looking at me for whatever reason. "Good luck with that, buddy."

James laughs, "Yeah, I don't think he has any sort of plan. It's all talk, I'm sure."

I tilt my head, "It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if that man got himself killed in an escape attempt." This receives some chuckling from the whole table. I then ask, "Anything else new in the world of Martinez?"

James' face darkens a tiny bit, "Well . . ."

My small smile falls, and I look at him quizzically, "What?"

James sighs, "Heard John got in a fight with one of his gang members. Managed to send the guy to the infirmary."

I instantly sit up in my chair, "When did this happen?"

"This morning, I think. Why? Do you think Martinez will do something?"

My mind starts racing, "He's always had it out for John. This may be his final excuse to do something about him." I trail off, lost in my own worried thought. John and I aren't too incredibly close, but I'd hate to see the kid get hurt by Martinez. He just doesn't know how places like this work.

I glance back to judge Martinez's expression, but see he's no longer there. Him and the two men he was talking with are nowhere in sight. "No . . ." I mutter.

I instantly shoot up, striding quickly away from the table. "Matt?" James shouts to me in concern, but I ignore him completely.

I push through all the people in the lounge, and take the steps two at a time. Worry of what Martinez will do has my heart racing. That man . . . he'll do anything when ticked off. If John really did harm one of his thugs, I don't know what I'll find when I get to our room.

I sprint down the hall, quickly getting to our room, in which the door is closed and I can hear thumps coming from inside. I take in a deep breath and throw open the door. Things are scattered on the floor, and Martinez is right up against John who he has pressed against the wall. His two men glance at me but don't do anything, as they obediently watch their leader.

And just as I'm about to intervene and get John out of this, Martinez brings his arm back, a large knife held in it. I scream John's name and spring forward, but I know it's too late.

The knife plunges into John's stomach, as he emits a high-pitched scream.

I'm then held back by the two thugs in the room. Forced to watch Martinez continually stab John, blood pouring out everywhere.

As small tears stream down my face, I'm forced to watch the murder of my cellmate.

## Chapter 2: Starting Over

They erased it.

Took that whole day, the whole memory of John from everyone's mind. They didn't even really question it. They took us all out of the room, and immediately put us, along with every other inmate who knew John, through treatment, and then gave us a shot to forget it all.

Like that was all John's life mattered. He was just a nuisance that would make us become more ill. He was just another problem they had to destroy from our minds. He was just . . . *nothing*.

And the worst part is that I have to play along. When they question me I have to completely sell it that I don't know John, and I never have. I have to convince them that I don't remember what had been my only other friend in this wretched place.

They bought it. They really did. But it killed a part of me on the inside to have to do it. To have to talk to James now, who truly doesn't remember John. I have to talk to him, careful of what I say, as to not cause any alarm among personnel in the building. It fills me with this immense sense of loneliness and sorrow. To know that I'm the only one in here, among the inmates, who remembers something.

I don't know . . . it's hard to describe.

I had to move past it though. It's been three weeks since the murder. Since the rebirthing of almost everyone here. And today's the day I got a new cellmate.

Just like that I have to move on, completely forget John, and act like I'm interested in getting a new person to share a room with. I can pull it off, I know I can. Just with a lot of inner hurt.

John's dead.

And I have to accept that and forget it. Who knows. Maybe they're right about this whole forgetting business, and I'll feel better as the memory of John fades into my far memories, forever lost in a sea of blur as I block him out.

Currently, I lean against the wall in my room. I lean right on the spot where John was murdered. I watch my new cellmate unpacking his one sole bag of personal belongings, studying him as he does.

It's just another kid, only in his teens. It's depressing seeing so many of them in here. He's got longish, stringy, blonde hair that hangs over his face. From the glimpses I get of his face, he has dark blue eyes, and a very skinny, defined face. He's a little shorter than me, and skinny, but not scrawny like John was. He wears dark jeans, and a light gray shirt, the normal outfit around here. That's about all they give us anyway, jeans and solid shirts. Less to think about, less to set us off I suppose.

I tried talking to the kid when he first got here, but he continually gave me one word answers, never meeting my eyes. I asked him all sorts of question but he gave me only the cold shoulder in return. I don't know what I did exactly, but he sure isn't my biggest fan at the moment.

"You just gonna' stand there and watch me unpack?" The kids asks, breaking the deafening silence.

"He speaks!" I say with mock enthusiasm. He doesn't even glance at me. I release an irritated sigh, "Yeah, I'm just gonna' stare at you in hopes that it'll make you talk more."

"Good luck with that." He mumbles.

"See! It makes you talk, kid!"

He finally shoots me a look. One that could equal death, yeah, but it's still a look. "Name's Nick." He says.

"Lovely to meet you, Nick." I say with a fake grin.

Nick rolls his eyes at me. He finishes unpacking, and then without a single word to me, he leaves the room.

I sigh, and stare at the door in disbelief, eventually wandering out, thinking hard about what I possibly could've done to receive that treatment.

It's been a week. A whole frickin week since this kid has been here. And he still has yet to see more than a few sentences to me at a time. I haven't found out anything about him besides the fact that his name is Nick, and that he's being a royal pain right now.

"I just don't get it." I fume to James, as we're working our mandatory shift preparing food for the inmates. If it can be called that. It looks more like shredded mush, with strange dashes of color in it. For all I know the food may be taking the memories of inmates too!

"I don't know, Matt." James replies, feeling a bit sorry for me, "Maybe he's just scared. Have you really tried talking to him?"

I motion to the kid, who's on the opposite side of the room, preparing another batch of the slop by himself. "Be my guest."

James shrugs, "Maybe I will after this. Most people don't care to talk while doing this anyway. It seems to just put them in a bad mood."

I laugh a little, "You got me there. But as soon as we're done, I'd like to see you try to get more than a few words out the kid."

He nods, "Alright I will. What's his name?"

"Nick." James nods once more and we continue on in the shift, mostly in silence.

A few guys I don't know, along with Martinez, are also with us throughout this time. Martinez seems to be eyeing Nick a bit. It worries me slightly, but if the kid doesn't

even care to give me a second of his time, I can't care too much about Martinez harassing him.

I continue to prepare gross morsel after gross morsel, but eventually my slight worry comes true. With only a few minutes left in the shift, Martinez and one other guy, stride over to Nick.

I catch Martinez mutter, "Hey, there newbie." but I can't hear much else. They're up close on him, on either side, obviously trying to intimidate him and make him as uncomfortable as possible. It looks like some kind of high school bully scene, rather than an insane killer harassing a poor kid. It's so pathetic, I'm tempted to laugh.

Nick says something to him, to which Martinez's face instantly falls into a scowl. I stop what I'm doing, staring right at the group. James glances at me, "Matt . . . don't do anything stupid."

Nick turns to face Martinez, who is talking to him very quietly, as to not let anyone else hear. Martinez's usual smirk of confidence is replaced with a very dark expression, one that looks as if it could cause Nick to drop dead where he stands. With every passing second Nick loses his barrier of self control. I can see it on his face. I know that look, it's happened to me before. Martinez is saying all the right things to get Nick to snap.

He wants him to. He wants Nick to lose it. That'll give him an excuse to do something, in so called self defense. This is not going to end well.

I realized I've mindlessly started to walk towards the two, now away from my table where I was working. James is eyeing me, worry taking over his face, but he doesn't stop me. He'd do something too, I imagine, if it wasn't for the fact that he hates any form of conflict.

Why am I doing this? What do I possibly owe this kid? He won't give me the time of day, why would I bother trying to protect him from Martinez? The kid obviously wants to be alone, and doesn't want any help. But even with those thoughts in mind, I find this strange sense of protectiveness growing inside of me. I don't want this kid to get hurt. There's just . . . something about him. Something good that I somehow sense, that is coming from nowhere.

I know instantly that I'm going to intervene in this situation.

Suddenly Nick's fist flies out from him, and catches Martinez right across the jaw. The entire room falls silent as Nick takes a step back, instantly realizing that he just did something incredibly dumb.

Martinez looks stunned for a split second and brings his hand up to his mouth, where he wipes off a small trace of blood. He looks at it on his hand and lets out this shocked laugh, with shake of his head.

Before anything else happens I rush in. I grab Nick by the arm, and lead him out of the room. He begins to question me but I cut him off, "Shut up. Just walk." I feel

Martinez's eyes gouging into the back of my head, but I keep walking, right out the door, and right back to our room, not once looking back.

“That,” I say as I sit down on my bed, “was incredibly stupid.”

Nick sits on the floor against the wall. Head tilted up, as he stares up at the fluorescent lights. He takes in a deep breath, but doesn't respond.

I run my hands through my hair, “I don't know what that's going to cause, kid. Martinez is a dangerous man, and something like that can easily set him off, and-”

“Thank you.” Nick says suddenly. “Thanks for getting me out of there.”

I allow a second of silence to pass before I nod, “Yeah . . . yeah, of course.”

Nick meets my eyes for a moment but then looks back up at the ceiling. Seriously why did I have to help him? I'm involved now, so if Martinez reacts, he'll be mad at me as well. He's such an unpredictable man, it terrifies me to wonder if he's coming for us any second now. Yes, it was just one punch, but you don't do anything like that to Martinez.

Maybe it's just because he's a kid. Almost reminds me of how I was when I was his age. The loner of the world, not rude, but appearing to be because he doesn't want to talk to anyone. And I just know there's more behind him. Something got him stuck in here with all of us crazies, but he's not like the usual ones. He seems relatively normal. Which just makes me think he may be a good kid, that just ran into some bad luck.

I don't know, maybe-

Suddenly our door flies open, and in steps Martinez. He holds a knife.

“You know, not your best hiding place.” He says with a grin.

I shoot up off the bed, and Nick retreats to the corner of our room. “Martinez,” I say cautiously, “he's just a kid. Leave him alone, alright?”

He chuckles to himself a bit, “Maybe. But maybe not. It all depends.”

I stare at him a second, “On what?”

He takes a step towards me, so he's almost against me. I try not to notice how far my head is tilted back to meet his eyes. “I have a proposition to make to you, Matt. A deal, if you'd like.”

So that's his play. He wasn't threatening Nick, just to threaten him, he was trying to get him to react. So that when he did, Martinez himself had a reason to threaten his life. He's holding that unspoken threat over my head, to make me do something. I have a few ideas in mind of what he'll say, but I can't be sure.

I glance back at Nick. The sight really shows how much of a kid he is. He's almost cowering against the wall. He's trying to stand and look like he doesn't care, but he's obviously terrified of this whole situation he's gotten himself into, and I instantly feel sorry for the kid. Sorry enough that I actually look back at Martinez and ask, “What's the deal?”

His yellow teeth reveal themselves in a grin, as he says, "As you know, I run a small gang around here. However, I don't have enough men for something I've been planning for some time now."

"So you need me to join your gang?"

He tilts his head, "Kind of. See, I need a man with your talents to help me. A man with your resolve and grit."

I sigh, "What are you getting at here, Martinez?"

He looks at Nick, "In exchange for me not killing your boy over there," he turns back to look at me, this calm evil in his eyes, "I want you to help me escape."

*Didn't expect that one.*

"That's not possible." I say, my mind racing at what he has planned, and what he'll do if I say no.

"Oh it is, my dear friend, I promise you. I just need you to say you'll help, and then I'll explain the plan later. You understand right? Can't be sharing information with someone who might turn me in." I stare at him with the most intense fury I can muster. He's blackmailing me to go on a suicide mission. It's ridiculous! There's no way to escape this place! And yet he knows I'll say yes, because for whatever reason I don't want this kid hurt. "So what'll it be, Matt? Escape, or a dead cellmate?"

God this makes me lose all kinds of faith in them erasing minds. Martinez is doing almost exactly what he did before the whole mess with John. Talks of escape, and having it out for my cellmates. That's either the medicine not working, or a sick twist of fate for me that I have to keep reliving.

*Say no! You don't know this kid! What has he done for you?!*

My minds screaming at me. Waging a war in my head, that it knows it'll lose, but it's still trying. I seem to not have any control over what I'm saying, as I look at Martinez once more, right in the eyes.

And I say, because apparently I'm incredibly stupid, "I'll help you."

## *The Darkness Inside*

The blood.

The shot.

The scream.

The betrayal.

Do you remember yet, Matt?

That fateful night, seeming to be oh so many eons ago. The night where you went from criminal to monster. The time where your demon finally broke free and unleashed its fury upon the world.

Did you mean to? Did you mean to kill those people?

Did you mean to kill . . . her?

Of course you did, Matt. Because you're just that screwed up. Your mind a tormented wasteland of death and destruction, that only wishes to kill. You always thought you weren't that bad. What harm were you causing anybody, besides taking some dough out of their pockets?

No one was getting hurt, it was all okay. Well . . . it was okay.

But then you just had to pull that trigger, huh? You just had to release your fury, because it couldn't be contained anymore! The inner fire blasted out like an explosion, killing those in your path!

The bullets rang, and the screams pierced, and the blood poured. And the massacre started, that took a good number of people's lives. People who were good, pure, much better than you. People who had families and loved ones, but are now taken away, leaving them to mourn in agony.

I guess you did get your punishment though.

Not only are you left to live with your tortured soul, but . . .

You lost your beloved.

### Chapter 3: The Beginning of the End

Why did I do it?

No freaking idea.

Maybe I'm even more mentally insane than I thought I was. Not only did I agree to participate in an escape attempt that *will* result in all of our deaths, but I did it for a kid I just met, who hasn't shown a single ounce of kindness towards me.

I really do deserve to be here.

The next week and half after my agreement with Martinez is relatively interesting. Martinez keeps giving me constant updates, certain plans they may try. None of them sound right, and I'm losing more and more faith in the whole operation as time goes on. I've also had a few more therapy sessions in that time. I received one shot, when talking about my criminal past. So now there's another part of me that I have to pretend I don't have. But besides that I managed to not give them much else to have to administer a shot for.

But the most interesting thing over this past week? It's Nick. The kid's finally opening up to me some. Which is about time, considering what I did for him. Things changed the instant I agreed to the suicide mission in order to keep Martinez away from him. We didn't talk right then and there, but I could tell he was grateful from the way he looked at me.

And just the next day he actually came up to me to talk. He said thank you a few times, and we talked a bit. I made sure he was okay, he made sure I was. And there just seemed to be this mutual agreement that we'd stick by each other from there on.

In the time up until now I've gotten to know him fairly well, actually. He told me a bit about his past. Which basically proved my suspicion that he really wasn't that bad of a kid. He's in here for a drug addiction. A very bad one, but still it's only for a drug addiction.

He told me he never really went to it on purpose, but that he had been in a very dark place. He had some very serious family problems and was depressed, and the local dealer was the only person he turned to. He didn't have anyone else, so he figured he'd forget and get lost in the drugs.

I guess it's a bit ironic, considering he's here now. Going to the drugs for an escape, when the ones here will truly make him forget.

It just irks me though. A kid like him doesn't deserve to be in here. From what I've gathered now that I've actually talked to him a lot, he's a very good kid. He's kind, thoughtful, smart, funny when he wants to be.

He's just a good kid in a bad situation.

I don't know if it's for the reason of expanding and experimenting with other people that he's here, but he sure isn't one of the crazies. Or like me. I've grouped him in with the category of John. Problems they can't handle, yet got put in the asylum anyway.

The one thing I do know is that I plan to keep this kid safe. I know I haven't known him for that long at all, but I see the light in him. He has the ability to change, I know he does. And I'm going to do everything in my power to get him out of here, and give him that chance he deserves.

Right now we sit a table in the middle of the lounge room. It's just me, James, and Nick. James is trying to get me invested in a card game, but I'm just not up for it at the moment. Nick sits quietly, writing in this notebook he's been carrying around with him. He tells me he writes in it, poetry mostly, but won't let me see. Whether it's just too personal or he simply doesn't want me to read it, I know I'm not allowed. I tried to convince him to let me see, but he got very cold, very quick, and I dropped the matter.

While James continues to try to get me to play, I stare at Nick. He almost looks normal from where we are right now. His head is tilted sideways, almost lying on the table, scribbling on the paper words that I can't make out. His face looks so intelligent and happy at the same time, and I almost feel like I'm not in a mental asylum for a second.

That is until I hear some random nut case let out a high pitched giggle.

I finally turn to James and say, "Hey, man, not today, okay?"

James face falls a bit, "Oh. Yeah, that's fine. Sorry."

I shake my head at him, "No, it's not you. Just . . . I'm just not feelin' it today."

He nods at me and offers a weak smile. I know I've hurt his feelings a bit, but I'm just not focused to try to defend myself further. The whole idea of escape and this place in general is just about killing me today.

In an attempt to distract myself I ask Nick, "What's the story today?"

He peers up at me for a minute, "Not much, really."

"No?"

He shrugs, "I dunno'. Inspirations just not hitting me today, I guess." He shoots me a small smile and then instantly goes back to the paper.

"Sure seems like . . ." I trail off as I see a guard approaching. This happens to be the worst one too. He's a particularly large black man. Bald, muscular. Kind of guy that'd give Martinez a run for his money. You'd think a guard in an insane asylum would be relatively low key, but he's abusive. He picks on and beats on any inmate whenever he gets the chance.

I hate him with every ounce of my soul. Unfortunately there's not even a name to curse, as none of the guards are allowed to give or wear their names.

He approaches our table and says in his gravelly voice, "Nicholas?"

He looks up from his writing curiously, “Yeah?”

“Come with me.” He already starts to turn.

“For what?” Nick asks starting to move away from the table.

The guard peers back over his shoulder, “Your first therapy session. I’m to escort you to your first one. Now move.”

He starts to walk away, not even giving Nick time to react.

My heart is rapidly sinking. I was hoping this day wouldn’t come. They give all the inmates time to adjust to this place before they start their treatment. Nick’s had been put off for so long I was wondering if they just weren’t doing it since he’s just a drug addict. But I guess not. And I instantly feel a deep pain, from the bottom of my heart, for him.

I want to do something, but I know there’s nothing I can do without getting myself in serious trouble. Nick shoots me a questioning look as he stands.

“It’ll be okay.” I assure him, “We’ll be here when you’re done.” He nods at me, still not looking certain, but reassured enough to follow the guard.

I watch him go and just try to ignore the fact that a piece of him will be gone when I next see him.

Soft shades of glistening moonlight pour in through the windows of the lounge room. James and I sit on either side of the opening to the hallway, still waiting for Nick to get back. We were all herded to our rooms two hours ago, but the two of us snuck out with no difficulty to await the kid.

I don’t know why he’s been gone for so long. And it’s rather terrifying.

James and I talk to each other in soft voices, just barely able to see each other in the white light cast across the room. Sharing our worries and concerns, and just hoping out loud that Nick will be back any second now.

“It’s his first session. I’m sure they have a lot more to talk about then. He’ll be fine, you’ll see.” James tries to reassure me.

“Yeah, but that means they’re taking a lot from him this first time around.” I argue.

James shrugs, “I still think you’re worrying for nothing.”

Just then I hear footsteps and I instantly shoot up off of the floor, James right by my side. “Nick?” I call out.

He staggers forward into the light and fear instantly grips my soul. He has his hands holding his head, and he’s barely able to stand. Tears roll down his cheeks and he’s heaving in sharp breaths.

I call out his name, and meet him in the hall just as he crumples to the ground. He completely folds into me, sobbing into hysterics. “I can’t . . . I can’t . . .” He’s repeating, unable to get out a sentence.

“What?! What’d they take?”

"I . . . I can't remember my father. What'd they do? How . . ." he starts smacking his forehead with both hands, "Why can't I remember?!"

My heart sinks. I want to cry with him. This is the most depressing sight I have probably ever seen in my life. I hold him against me, "It's okay. I'll explain later, just calm down for now. Okay? You're with us now, they can't take anything else."

He sobs into my shirt, his voice muffled against the fabric, "I can't remember . . . I can't remember him . . ."

"I know. It's okay. I'm sorry." I keep repeating those three phrases over and over again.

We sit like that for an eternity. Me repeating comforting phrases, Nick sobbing, and James just looking on with a sorrowful expression as he rests his hand on Nick's shoulder.

Eventually we start moving back to our room. And once there, we get Nick in bed. He doesn't sleep for a long time, but eventually he drifts off into the world of dreams, as I say one last thing, "I won't let them take anything else from you. I won't let them hurt you again."

## The Terrible World of Coincidence

They never believe you.  
When you say that you didn't mean to.  
That you didn't mean to get  
caught in the intoxicating mess  
of medications and drugs.

They say it's all your fault.  
That the pain, and misery that you must  
be tortured by  
is completely and utterly because of you.

Maybe they're right.

Maybe.

But I like to think that's not the case for everyone.

That some are just unlucky, and that some  
don't get a choice.

That some are forced from reality, because their lives are too bad  
to try to suffer through.

That some don't get to decide if they want to have a good life,  
or throw it all away.

Some are forced from the innocence of childhood into something  
dark and disturbing.

A force they can't control.

A force that pushes them into forgetting,  
and numbness,

and blurred lines

that they think make them happy.

That they think have the ability to erase it all  
and make them whole again.

Some.

Most.

But then there are the ones like me.

The ones who aren't destroyed by terrible coincidences,

But by themselves.

-Nick

## Chapter 4: Beautiful Ignorance

“Don’t give them anything to take. Build a wall between the doctor and you, and don’t you dare let it give for even a second.”

I sit in my room with Nick. We’re seated on the floor, right in the middle, facing each other. I’ve taken it upon myself to train him in the art of dodging the doctors’ questions. In other words I suppose I’m teaching him how to make the doctors very annoyed, which honestly gives me a small ounce of joy.

After last night . . . I need to help him somehow. He needs to build up his barrier. He needs to make the doctors struggle for memories to take. The harder it is, the less they’ll get. And typically the ones they do get, aren’t too important. I can’t even understand the feeling.

Honestly at times I want to, with the amount of darkness I have to live with, but after seeing how Nick was acting, I’m not so sure. I know he had family problems, he told me so. I’ve asked him about it again today, but he can’t tell me any specifics of what happened any more. He can’t remember his father at all.

They took a very large chunk of him and it almost ruined him. If I hadn’t been able to talk him down, and get him relaxed, I don’t think he would’ve been okay. Kind of like a mind melt down. It’s happened to a few guys here. Albert, the crazy old man, being one of them. Sometimes they take too much from us too quickly, and it’s so traumatic that the insane people truly lose their minds.

Thank God it didn’t happen to Nick.

“How though?” he asks, “I don’t know how to do that? I was starting to, but they threatened me when I started getting difficult.”

“And that’s all they are. Threats. I think in some extreme cases they go to more forceful methods, but they’ve only ever threatened me. And trust me, I put them through a lot with how much I refuse to answer.”

Nick gives me a small nod, “Okay. I’ll try . . .” He stares off. He’s looking at the wall behind me, lost in his own world.

“Hey.” His head snaps back towards me. “It’s gonna’ be alright. Okay?”

He nods, and lets out a long, drawn out sigh, “Yeah . . . okay.”

I stare into his eyes a bit longer. They’re so innocent. I know he’s been through a lot in his life, but he hasn’t had so much happen that he’s completely lost who he used to be. That kid, the one with a normal teenage life, is still in there somewhere. The one who had hopes and dreams, and aspirations of greatness. The one who built worlds with his words in his notebook. The one who was a true good kid.

He stares back at me, and I realize that in the short time we've known each other he's come to trust me now. We had a rough start, and are still getting there now, but there's a definite sense of mutual respect.

I take in a deep breath and pat his knee, "What do you say we go get some lunch?"

He nods, and together we get up and start to head out. As we do I keep silently praying that this place won't ruin him.

We sit on a couch, facing the windows in the lounge. Just Nick and I. Over the past few days, there's been a lot of tension in our lives. Martinez hasn't updated me lately, which makes me think he has something bigger going on. Something that's taking a lot more time to organize, and I guess that's a good sign.

I still don't know how this is all going to go. It almost doesn't feel real. I shouldn't have gotten involved, but I'm also glad I did. Now that I know him, I'm glad I was able to save this kid. No matter how everything ends up, I'm glad I did something good for once in my life. I was able to save Nick's life for the time, and I still intend to get him out of here. That's honestly the only thing giving me motivation to help with the escape.

Nick and I have grown closer though. He's actually letting me read a few poems in his notebook. They're all so him, it's hilarious. It describes mostly whatever he's feeling at the time. Some are about his past, his life currently, what he used to be. And they're stunningly beautiful to read.

I finish one now in which he talks about how most kids don't choose the life he had on purpose. How they don't have a choice but to be forced into the world of drugs. But how Nick sees his own self at fault, and that that he actually is to blame. It's sad, but still interesting to read.

I hand the notebook back to him, "Those are amazing."

He laughs a little and takes it, "Thanks."

"I mean it," I say looking at him, "You got some real talent."

He stares out the window again, and nods slowly, "Too bad I'm mentally ill."

I shake my head, "You're not. I promise you, you're not. You just got into some bad things, and you sure aren't the only one out there. I don't know how you got the poor luck to end up in here, but I'm going to do everything in my power to get you out, for that reason."

"My wonderful hero." He says with a teasing grin.

I return it, "Hey, I try." This receives some small laughter from both of us.

We stare out the windows for a little bit. Just in this peaceful silence. We stare at the rolling green hills, and bright, blue skies dotted with puffy clouds. It's such a picturesque scene, it doesn't look real. Especially not for who the view is for. It fills me

with a sense of hope though. Like that freedom is right there, and that all I have to do is reach for it.

“Seriously though,” Nick breaks the silence, “thank you. For everything you’re doing. If you ask me, I . . . I don’t know how *you* ended up here. The amount of good I’m seeing from you, I just don’t get it. I don’t care if you did something to get here, and I don’t care that you won’t tell me what it is. I just want you to know I’m grateful for the guy who’s looking out for me now.”

I stare back at him a second, and then pat his shoulder, a smile blooming on my face. “Thanks, kid.” He nods, and then I say, “Alright . . . I got a session to get to.” I stand and say, before walking away, “See you after?”

He nods, “Yep, have fun!” He gives me a fake grin, and I laugh and start to head out. Just as I’m exiting the lounge he shouts to me, “Give em’ hell for me!”

And I actually laugh a beautiful laugh on my way to a therapy session.

“You’ve been dodging this for long enough, Mr.Barstow.” I stare into my doctor’s eyes, my face completely blank, not giving him a single hint or emotion. I know he can’t take them . . . my memories. My inner being. But I still hate the fact that that’s what they would be doing if I wasn’t immune. It’s not right. It’s evil. This man, if he can even be called that, is evil. “It’s time we finally talk about how you came to be here, Matthew.”

Without missing a beat, I say, “No.”

He sighs, and rubs his hands over his head, “Matthew, this is your last, and final warning. Talk to me about your past, or we are going to use alternative methods to make you speak.”

I let out a grunt slash laugh, “Are you now?”

The doctor stands, and presses a button on his desk, “Very well. I don’t think you understand the seriousness of the situation. I’m done playing around. It’s time you tell.”

I look back as the door opens, and in steps the giant of a guard. I quickly stand up and backstep to the edge of the room. “Don’t struggle too much.” the behemoth growls and he lunges at me with a shot, that has a dark red liquid in it.

I don’t know what it is, but I don’t want it. I attempt to dodge out of his reach, but he’s much bigger than I anticipated. His hand wraps around my arm, and yanks me backwards. I lose my balance and almost fall completely to the floor. He catches me though and without allowing another second to pass, plunges the needle into my arm.

I feel the liquid course in and start to spread through my veins. It’s warm. Unnatural. And *very* unnerving.

The giant leaves once again, I think smiling a bit at the fun he just got to have. I stare at the doctor, fury behind my eyes. “What did you do?” I ask, my voice filled with hatred.

He doesn't respond, but instead, leans back happily in his chair. "Are you ready to talk now?"

*No.* The word doesn't come out . . .

"Yes." I say. I didn't even mean to. That wasn't me, that wasn't my decision. What . . . what is this?

"Very good, Matthew!" He grabs his notebook and pen, "Now, let's start with a simple question. Did you kill your wife, Matt?"

My whole body tenses where I stand. It's like a punch to the gut. A punch that makes me want to scream and cry and tear this man's face apart. "Yes." My mouth says.

No . . . why am I responding?! Why? It's the medicine, it's making me talk. It's giving me no self control. It's making me tell about the past.

The past that'll break free and destroy me from within as soon as it does.

"Why did you kill her, Matthew?"

I stare at him, trying to force my mouth to stay shut. There's this burning sensation running through my entire body. A hot fire that's tearing me apart on the inside. It's shredding my mind to pieces, and finding the information it wants me to say.

It's going to kill me.

"Because she tried to kill me." My mind says.

"Oh?" The doctor asks quizzically. "And why would she do that?"

I'm trying to hold it in. I'm trying not to break down, trying in vain not to let my mind tear itself apart and spill the demons of my past forward. My whole body starts to shake, and I drop to the ground, screaming in rage.

I press my hands painfully into the sides of my head. "No, no, no, no . . ." Tears stream hot down my face, and the fire inside starts to burn more intensely. I let out a strangled cry of pain and misery, completely on the ground, almost rocking back in forth in my insane meltdown.

I'm trying to hold back the dam. It needs to stay, or there's no going back. I may not be okay afterwards, having to relive these memories. Having to go through the pain that I buried so deep, all over again. They'll ravage me until I'm nothing but a sack of rotting flesh, no longer able to live. Brain dead.

"Matthew?"

And that's all I hear from there on out.

The visions crack through, and suddenly I'm seeing that fateful night, like I'm actually there again. It's so real, I want to scream in terror but I can't because I don't know exactly where I am.

Trapped in my own head I think. Condemned to see what I haven't had to in so long. I see myself outside of the bank. It's raining, and dreary, and miserable out. I, along with two other men, carry bags of cash.

I'd done it before. A lot. My wife and I . . . my beautiful, Lacey. We were struggling for cash. Very badly. I stole here and there, getting us by, and never having her suspect a thing. I didn't ever hurt anyone. So what's the harm, right?

Well on this particular night, I was given the opportunity of a real job. A real bank, some serious money. It could put Lacey and I well off for a good long while. So I did it. Again, why not? I saw no harm in what I was doing. I had never shot anyone, harmed, or killed a soul.

At least I hadn't until that night . . .

We were being chased by guards. They were going to kill us, so . . . We shot back. I hit one. The adrenaline allowed me to not really care. So I shot another. And another. One got up on me and I shot him point blank. The blood sprayed out and that's when it finally hit me.

For some reason the warmth of the blood smacking my skin, slapped me out of my trance. I cried out in shock, realizing what I had done.

And without even thinking I ran. I ran and ran and ran. All the way back to my house. I burst in, shouting for Lacey.

She came down from upstairs, in a silky, pink, nightgown I had bought her not just a few days ago. She screamed at the sight of me.

She screamed at me like I was a monster.

I tried to walk towards her but she ran into the kitchen, grabbing the phone and a knife. She called nine one one, as I shouted at her to stop. I tried to explain that I did it for us, and that I never meant to hurt anyone. Tears poured out, from both of us, as she hung up the phone, telling me to go away. To stay away from her.

I attempted to walk towards her again, but she was so skittish she threw the knife at me.

And in my reaction I pulled the trigger on my gun that I forgot I was even holding.

And I watched the blood spout from her, and gather on the floor.

And I watched the life in her eyes be replaced by a foggy, gray sheet.

And I watched her body slump to the floor, hitting like a sack of bricks.

And I cried and cried and cried.

I had killed my wife.

And I killed myself in the process.

Reality leaks back in, but not completely. I'm a sobbing ball of hysterics on the soft, carpeted floor. I feel a prick in my arm, followed by the doctor saying, "See? That wasn't so bad. That'll be all for today. Thank you, Mr. Barstow."

I can't even respond. I don't have the ability to.

I want to tell this man how much I hate him. How hate isn't even close to enough. How I want to tear him to shreds right this very moment, savoring every scream that he emits as I do.

But all I can do is run from the room.

I stumble down the hallway, collapsing at intervals along the way.

My mind is an open wound, threatening to kill me at any second. An infection of darkness seeping slowly through my veins. Reaching out to every inch of me, and decomposing the life in it.

The visions won't leave.

I watch her die, over, and over, and over again.

Her screams. Her blood. Her looks of betrayal.

A never ending stream of torment.

I somehow make it back to my room. I don't know what time it is, or where anyone else is. Nick must be in the room, because I hear a muffled, deep voice somewhere in the background. Somewhere in the land of reality, trying to pull me back, but failing.

I think he's screaming at me. Asking what happened, if I'm okay.

But I can't answer. I can't do anything.

I just collapse onto the floor, sobbing deep, hysterical sobs as I descend into the dark void of insanity.

## Chapter 5: Aftermath

“Run, run, run.” His body rocks back and forth, frantically and in jerky sways. His hands wrap around the back of his neck, face down towards the ground. The old man has truly lost it.

Albert wasn't always like that. When I first got here, he was relatively normal. Seemed like a nice, elderly man, who did something bad earlier in his years, but now realized his mistakes. He would laugh, and joke, and tell you those “back in my day” stories.

It was nice to talk to Albert.

Until *they* got to him.

Whatever they explored that day, whatever they decided to prod at, it was just a bit too sensitive. A bit too traumatic, a bit too much. The next we saw of Albert, he was being carried back to his room by the behemoth.

He was mumbling under his breath, and drooling on the guard, who looked none too pleased with the situation. The day after that . . . he was what he is now.

A broken down mess, of pure insanity. Rambling on in incoherent sentences, and rocking back and forth all day. Forever lost in that maze of a mind, that the doctors left no escape path to. They took away certain bonds, certain links of his that just couldn't be taken. It's like the support beams of a building. They took those and the whole thing just crumbled in upon itself. Not a stream of light in there. No life.

“Fear, suspicion, awakening.” I hear his whispering voice through frantic breathing.

I watch him. Study how this asylum ruined him. Destroyed a perfectly good man. They almost got me.

Last night . . . I didn't think I was going to make it. I truly didn't. Each memory, each vision, was another stab at my soul. Ripping pieces from me, and shredding my very being to nothing. I don't know how long I was on that floor. I don't know how frightening I must've looked.

Nick was crying at some point. I remember that. He was sobbing and shouting at me to stop, begging me to stop dying on the floor. The only problem was that it wasn't my body that was dying, but my mind. So I couldn't even respond to him.

He sobbed, and sobbed, asking what to do, but not wanting to go get the guards, in fear of what *they* would do. Eventually he sat there with me. Cradling my head in his arms, whispering words that I cannot remember. There was the soothing drone of his voice, and my mind slowly losing it's grip. Slowly dying away . . .

I don't know what it was. Nick's comforting words. Or just my will to keep going for him. But somehow everything started to become clear around me. My senses slowly heightened again, and the memories faded.

As I came back down from the mountain of insanity Nick and I sat there all night. Not once moving, not saying word, until we both drifted off into sleep.

"Labcoats, crazies, chaos." The ever constant whisper of Albert continues.

This morning I got up, walking without purpose to the lounge. Nick's still asleep in our room. And all I have done is watch Albert.

I don't know what to do with myself.

Yes, the memories have gone back into my head again to stay, hopefully forever. But they're not away like they had been. Quick seconds of my dead wife keep popping into my vision when I least expect it. They actually make me flinch away in terror.

It's a memory like that that I really do want to forget. Or no, not forget . . .

But change.

I want to go back to that day, or even earlier. And just stop myself. Stop myself from getting into the business that I did. Stop myself from ever getting any form of weapon. Stop myself from accepting that final bank job. Stop myself from pulling my trigger on the guards. Stop myself from . . . from killing my Lacey.

Stop myself from getting a ticket to this hell on Earth.

I want to cry. But I can't. Tears don't happen often for me anymore. They're something that I used up long ago. Except for occasions like last night, I don't show much emotion. I can't afford to. I have to keep myself pulled together.

Especially now. Especially when the doctor will be monitoring me, to make sure I don't remember the events of last night. I can show a bit of confusion and sadness, most know when they lose something. But I have to be careful. Or my cover will be blown, and they'll know I'm immune. Who knows what they'll do then.

"Think, think, think."

I wish I could follow Albert's advice there. But there's just not much to think about. I want to make everything better. I want to just get out of here. I want to murder my doctor in the most gruesome way possible.

But I can't.

"Fight, fight, fight."

I guess that's what I have to do.

I just have to forget on my own. I have to not let the past hurt me. It's the past there's nothing I can do. Do I regret it? Every day. But I need to focus on the now. On what lies ahead.

I'm going to fight. For Nick, for James. For myself. We're going to get out of here. We're going to destroy this place from the inside out, and burn the wretched thing to the

ground. We'll leave in a blaze of glory, heading off into new lives. Starting over in places where no others are, and we'll live as one big, happy, insane family.

I am finally convincing myself of Martinez's plan.

"Bleed, bleed, bleed." Albert mutters a bit louder.

I stare at him a second, and laugh softly to myself. "I'm sorry, old man."

About an hour later, as I lie my head down on the table, just listening in on the loud sounds of the asylum, a chair slides out to my right and someone takes a seat. I take a peek over my arms, and see it's Nick, staring at me with a concerned but slightly relieved expression.

I sit up, and lean back in my chair staring back at him with almost no emotion.

He takes a deep breath in, "Hey."

I smile a bit, "Hey, kid."

He gives me a questioning look, "Was that a smile?"

I shrug, "I suppose it was."

He nods, relief instantly flooding through his body. "I guess I don't have to ask you if you're okay then. Or . . . at least I don't think I do?"

I shake my head in reassurance, "No. I . . . I think I'm good. Still going through a lot, but . . . all that stuff from last night is gone."

He nods again, and then we're silent for a bit. Seeming to be comforted by just the presence of one another, as we try to forget the events of last night. "I want to thank you," I say eventually, "for last night. I know that was terrifying, and I know you probably think you didn't do much, but . . . you did. You're most likely the reason I'm not brain dead right now."

He laughs softly, "I know, actually. You said almost the same thing before you passed out last night."

I look at him, "Really? Don't remember that at all."

"Well you did. But you're still welcome. I couldn't just not do anything."

I smile at him, "So I say anything else I don't remember?"

It was meant as a joke, but his smile slides away, and he looks a bit worried.

"Well . . ." he breathes in deeply, "You told me about your past." He thinks a moment, and adds, "And about how you're immune to what they do here." My face drops, disbelief clouding it. Nick quickly shakes his head, "No, don't give me that look."

"But-

"Matt, look." He sits forwards, "I don't care." The disbelief just grows at that.

"Yeah it was a bit shocking to hear, but I really don't care."

I shake my head slowly, "How?"

"Because it's your past. That's all it is. The only guy I know is the one who's here right now. The one who decided to protect me just because he felt it was right. The one

who's willing to risk his life in an escape attempt for the sole reason of not wanting me to get hurt. The one who put some life back into me." He pauses a second, "I only care about the the best friend I've ever had. One that I came to know in about a month that felt like a year."

I lean my head on my hand, in complete shock of the wonderfulness of this kid. How easily accepting of me he is. I knew I saw that in him, that light, that trusting of a close friend. I don't regret doing what I did in order to save him for even a second. "Thank you, Nick. For that. I-"

He motions his hand up a minute and says, "You don't need to say anything else. It's over and done. Not to be spoken of again."

He smiles a bit, and I laugh, "I won't argue with that."

We talk for a bit more then. He doesn't even ask any questions about my immunity to the medicine. The amazingness showing more and more, as we just talk like nothing new has happened. Like I didn't just go through the worst experience in my life, like he didn't find out about very terrible and strange things. Like we're not going to be breaking out of this place soon in which people may die.

Like we're not in a mental asylum.

James eventually joins us, along with a few others and we start a game of poker. Laughing and jeering at each other like we're old friends catching up at a bar.

It's absolute bliss.

And exactly what we needed.

Even when Martinez slowly strides past me my mood isn't affected.

Even as he walks by, whispering just quietly enough for me to hear something, I continue to laugh almost to the point of tears.

Even as I hear his whisper in my head, as I hear the words, "Tomorrow night." in my brain I don't react.

I just enjoy myself, while plans of escape linger in the back, starting to prepare as Martinez's two words warn to do.

## Future of Sorrow

I had dreams  
Little hopes and gleams  
Stories of a future, bright  
Woven in like little pockets of light

Except it didn't turn out that way  
From a very young age I had to pay  
Instead of the freedom of a child  
I gave it all away for a life more wild

Without cares I forgot and got high  
Not even wondering if I could die  
I lost myself to visions and dreams  
But not the old bright gleams

No these ones were darker and bleak  
Coloring my world with a violent streak  
People fought and people lied  
All thinking the pain would hide

But our escapes...  
were just an illusion

Hidden not far inside is the pain  
Trying to get rid of it, trying in vain  
But we all know we can't escape it  
The demons are here, the darkness lit

And no mix of chemicals and pills  
No mix of hallucinogens kills  
A place of light, there is no map  
We've condemned ourselves in a trap

We are forever lost in a maze  
A blurry, depressing haze

The darkness doesn't turn to day  
The sorrow is here to stay.

-Nick

## Chapter 6: Destruction from Within

I hand Nick a pistol. Fully loaded and ready to shoot. He looks at me, uncertainty present in his expression.

“It’s okay,” I say, “You know how to shoot?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, I do. I just . . . didn’t think I’d ever be holding one of these again.”

Martinez had a little secret meeting last night. All packed into his room, James and I joined his gang on the run through of what’s about to go down. In perfect Martinez style, there’s not much to his plan.

We’re going out guns blazing.

He managed to threaten and barter with a guard, smuggling all kinds of weapons in over the past few weeks. Semi-automatics, pistols, shotguns, knives of all shapes and sizes, and some steel bats and crowbars.

Guns blazing might not seem like the smartest thing to do, but with the amount of people we actually have with us, and the amount of weapons we’re all armed with. I think I actually have faith in the suicide mission.

Not to get too optimistic, but . . . this might just work.

That was about it for the meeting. He gave what he called a pep talk and then sent us off to bed, commanding us to rest up for the fight ahead. He was actually pretty convincing, I have to hand it to him.

I stand by the door to our room with Nick, telling him what to do and what to expect not too long from now. “You ever use it on someone?” I ask.

He nods, “Yeah . . . hit some people, but I’ve never killed. At least I don’t think I have.”

I think this through a minute and then say, “Well don’t think you have to, okay? That gun is for your protection. If you have to use it, you have to use it. But if you don’t think you can, you just keep it up in defense. Anyone comes for you, aim low. Disable them, do whatever you have to do without giving a kill shot.”

This is a practice I’m all too familiar with . . .

He nods, taking in a nervous breath, “Okay.” God he looks so scared. I want to hug him, but that’d be weird for both of us.

Instead I lie a hand on his shoulder, “Most importantly you stick by me. Don’t leave my side for a second. I’ll watch out for the two of us. I’m gonna’ get you out of here, Nick.” He nods, looking grateful. I straighten up, dropping my hand. “Good.”

I’m about to say we should head out when Nick says, “Matt, I . . . before we leave. I just want to say thank you again. No matter what happens once we step out this

door, I want you to know how much you mean to me. Doing what you've done for my safety . . . I can't say thank you enough. You're practically like a father to me."

I smile at him, "No problem, kid." He returns a small, terrified smile to which I give him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, "Ready?"

"Never gonna' be," he says with a shaky laugh.

I laugh as well, and say, jokingly, "Well suck it up, because the fun's about to begin."

He shakes his head, a smile still plastered on, "I'll sure try."

And with that I open the door, and we head out.

Everyone starts to gather in the lounge. About two thirds of the inmates, almost all able bodied men are gathered. Slowly coming from spots around the room, or down the steps, or through the hall. All the crazies are gathering.

And for once in a very long time, we're organized. Minds set on only one thing: Escape.

Some of the true nut cases, or ones not brave enough to step up, watch on from the sides, waiting to see how it all plays out. Waiting to see how the insanity in us all is let loose. Right up front, looking on at the ever growing mass of people, are James, Nick, Martinez, and I.

Martinez and I are positioned right next to each other, half turned to our small army, and half turned to the hallway, where two guards, including the behemoth stand, looking on with worry, and occasionally talking into ear pieces they have on. "We've captured their attention." Martinez states with pride.

"No going back now." I say to him, not really worried about it.

I'm ready for this. We're ready for this. It's time to get out of here. I'm done being mentally insane. Done being a specimen they think they can just poke and prod and take bits of. I'm done being their puppet they want to mold in their own vision.

Nick stands a bit towards my right, and I shoot him a quick glance, checking to see how he's holding up. He gives me a quick nod. I'm about to give one back, but James appears in my vision, looking a bit worried. "Matt?"

"What's wrong?"

He takes a shuddery breath, looking around as he does, "I'm not sure if I can do this. What if I break down?"

I can't believe I forgot about him. His PTSD. This is going to be very difficult for him. Gunshots, screams, blood, the general loudness and intensity of it all is most likely going to set him off. I can't leave him though, that's not an option. He's my best friend, has been since day one in here. I'm getting him out as well. I'll protect him. "You'll be okay. Alright? Stick with me, like Nick's going to. I need you to try to help, but if you feel

yourself slipping even a little, you let me know, and stay back out of the heat of the fight.”

He nods, “Alright, man.”

“We got this. I know we do.”

“I sure hope so,” he says with one last sigh, “I trust you, Matt.”

We give each other a quick hug. Just one of those half, arm hugs. Almost like it’s a just in case gesture. Just in case this doesn’t all go perfectly. Just in case we don’t see each other on the other side.

Which is very likely.

Martinez hits my shoulder with the back of his hand. I turn to him as he motions to the giant walking towards us. “Show’s about to begin, kids.” He mutters to our small group up front. He then turns to our army, which is now gathered and waiting, and yells at the top of his lungs, “Get ready! We’re about to get out of here! You fight with every ounce of your soul and don’t let up for even a second! For those that don’t make it, it’s been an honor knowing you! Now it’s time for ESCAPE!”

Most impressive speech ever? Not even close. Does it get our army riled up? Definitely. It’s met by a massive roar of defiance and fury. One that rings through the entire room, echoing down the corridors, and piercing my ears. A cry that almost causes the behemoth to stop where he is.

It’s only a slight falter in his step as he immediately continues towards us, until he’s eye to eye with Martinez. “What exactly do you all think you’re doing?” he growls, voice low and full of anger.

Martinez pretends to think about it a moment, “I believe we’re intending to get out of here.”

“Step down now, and you won’t get hurt.” The guard says simply.

Martinez shakes his head, “I just don’t think we’re going to do that.” He glances back at our mass of crazies, “Are we boys?” This is met by a resounding chorus of swears and insults, and cries of outrage and defiance. A roar that would make any normal person flee.

The behemoth starts to growl, “Don’t make me-”

Martinez suddenly pulls out his semi-automatic and shoots the behemoth’s legs, causing him to cry out in pain and fall to the ground. Just before he hits, Martinez tosses the gun to one of his men and catches him. He then spins the monster upright, so he’s standing, only being supported by Martinez’s arms. He’s at an angle so that his head hangs down, slowly moaning in pain, as the blood oozes from his mangled legs. “Not so tough are we?” Martinez whispers in his ear. He then looks at me, “Matt. Why don’t you do us the honor of starting off the carnage?”

I walk towards the behemoth. It's pathetic. How quickly he went down. So tough, in his torturous ways to patients. Beating on them, and torturing whenever he could get the chance. And now he's at my mercy.

I look into his eyes. They're actually scared. He doesn't want to die. He's pleading with me silently. Begging with every ounce of his corrupted soul, to spare him. But visions of him plunging that god forsaken red shot into me surface, and my mind is already made.

His eyes go dark as I press my gun under his chin, pointed upwards. "My pleasure," I say with a small smile.

And then, pulling the trigger, I put the lumbering giant to sleep.

And that's when the chaos breaks out.

Screams, gunshots, roars, everything turns insane.

The inner beings of us push out and inherit the world. They take over the asylum, turning it dark red as an alarm starts to blare. Our worlds are bathed in the sins we have still in all of us somewhere, that have been waiting to come out and play.

The alarm blares, the asylum is going dark, the inmates are killing and screaming.

Pure . . . chaos.

And immediately . . . I lose track of Nick and James. As soon as I shot the behemoth, the ensuing madness swept up the two I care about most, and now I worry for their lives. I should be fighting with the rest, shooting at the already large onslaught of guards, but instead I frantically run around in search of my two friends. My family.

I call out their names in between protective shots I have to send out. Running and dodging between friend and foe. Worry taking over more of me with every passing second.

Eventually I stand at the edge of the room, staring at the madness. Trying in vain to spot the two, but with no luck. I suddenly realize I stand right next to Albert, who is now rocking back and forth with extreme speed. He slams the back of his head into the wall with every rock back, and is chanting these lines at the top of his lungs. It's not his usual, incoherent mumblings, it sounds whole. Like some kind of message.

And that . . . was incredibly stupid of me to try to listen in on. Because in the time that I tried to figure out his words, someone came up behind me and wrapped an arm around my neck. They choke me and drag me backwards. I flail around trying to shoot or grab at anything, but my gun is instantly knocked way, and someone else comes up and lifts up my feet, so I'm now completely off of the ground. They run around the battleground and into the hallway behind it all.

They run down, jostling me around, still not allowing me to breathe. I slap at their arms, but it's hopeless. Fortunately they reach some kind of room, open it and then throw me in.

I hit the floor with a thump and grunt. My vision is blurry, and I barely am able to position my hands on the floor to start to push myself up. With a deep breath I push up with a moan, and manage to get up to a standing position. I look around, disoriented, and instantly realize I'm in the therapy room. I look at the desk, and there he is. The doctor that's been torturing me for what feels like ages. The one who made me relive my darkest, most torturous memories.

Before I can say anything to him, he shakes his head and laughs cruelly, "Oh, Matt, what have you gotten us all into?"

"I'm getting us all out of here. This isn't right. None of it. Taking people's memories? Taking parts of them that they can never get back? Even if it's taking the bad ones, it's disgusting. It's torturous, you ruin people."

"But . . ." the doctor says, sliding the chair out from his desk, "We can't do that to you, now can we, Matthew?" I freeze instantly, the sentence that was going to come out, catching in my throat. The doctor stands and smiles, "We're not stupid, Matt. We've known for a long time. We've just been letting it go, we wanted to see how it'd play out. How you'd cope with everything. For awhile there, I was convinced you were making progress. Obeying rules, mostly, not having any violent outbursts, appearing to act normal. You were on track to getting out of here without any different treatment." I try to interrupt but he goes on, "But after recent events . . . I guess I was wrong."

I don't even know how to respond. It's so shocking, my voice is just frozen. They've known . . . they've known the whole time . . . and yet they still made me relive all of my memories, knowing I couldn't forget, knowing that it'd only torture me. "You're insane." I say.

He laughs out loud, "Odd of you to be saying that to me! No, Matt, you've proved to us that *you* are insane. You've showed us how truly ill you are, and that you are simply a lost cause. I do have something for you though . . . something that even your mind can't resist." He motions the two guards forward. One wraps his arm around my chest, pinning my arms to my sides, and then with his other arm tilts my head back against his shoulder. The other forces open my mouth with one hand, and then shoves some kind of pill down my throat, his hand going all the way in, choking me to make sure it goes down.

They then release me and I drop to the floor, coughing hysterically, and trying to throw the pill back up. But it stays in me. Whatever they just gave me, isn't going away.

I wipe spit from my mouth and stand back up, staring at the doctor with raw fury, "What did you just give me?"

He tilts his head, while resting his hands on his desk, "Just something new I've been working on in the lab. Just finished it a couple days ago, in fact. It's something that will work on you."

I'm about to question him on the effects but then his wording hits me.

That *he* was working on?

He notices my expression and smiles, "Ah, yes. I do suppose now is a good a time as any to become acquainted." He straightens up, and smiles, "My name is Dr. Warren. Owner and founder of this asylum."

It hits me like a hammer to the head. So much is coming at me, that it's tearing apart my thoughts, making me want to curl into a ball in confusion. I've been going through therapy with Dr. Warren this entire time. The owner giving his specific attention to me, and me only. The fact just doesn't seem real. And not to mention the worry coursing through me of what the pill he just forced into me is going to do.

As if he were reading my thoughts he continues, "I imagine your silence is because of that pill, am I correct? Well . . . let me ask you a question first, before I explain it. Tell me, Matthew, what was your mother's first name?"

"It was . . ." I trail off, staring off into space.

*It was . . . Oh, God . . . I don't know. I don't remember.*

I can't remember my mother's name. The memory is gone.

Dr. Warren smiles, an evil grin, "Well there you go, Matthew. That's what the pill does. See this isn't like our normal treatment. No this one I made specifically for lost causes like yourself. This pill is working it's way through your brain right now, destroying all kinds of memories as it finds them. This pill is going to wipe you clean. You won't even remember your own name by the end of it. You are going to lose *everything*." He takes in a deep breath, the smile falling slightly, "It's the only way to fix you. I hope you understand."

I stumble back. This can't be happening. This can't be real.

I hold my hands to my head, trying to recall simple things, and already realizing I'm losing pieces of myself. And I'm also realizing I don't want to.

I had been conflicted on the issue for so long. Wondering if it'd actually better to forget. But not like this. Not by having all of me removed. I don't want to be turned to nothing, reborn completely not having a single memory to myself. Even through all the bad, there's so much I don't want to lose.

"What . . . what have you done?" I stutter out as I hit the back wall.

Dr. Warren looks at me so innocently, "I don't know what you mean, Matthew. I've helped you. You're going to start over."

I shake my head, "How could you . . . you sick, twisted, bastard, how COULD YOU?!"

He only continues to smile at me, "I'm sorry, Matt. But it's for the best."

I'm about to scream at him. About to yell incoherent insults and remarks, anything that comes to mind. I'm about to lunge at him. I'm about to tear him to shreds. I'm about to rip his head off.

I'm about to do so much when the door kicks open, and Martinez bursts in. He shoots the two guards dead, and then starts to motion the gun towards Dr. Warren.

Dr. Warren still smiles, as if fascinated by the deaths of his two men. He knows what's coming next, but doesn't show a hint of fear. Instead he looks me right in the eyes and says, "It's too late for you anyway. Enjoy your final moments, Mr. Barstow."

Martinez then sends a bullet through his head, as I'm left collapsing onto the floor, screaming in agony as my mind is taken from me.

## *Out of the Mouths of Crazies*

You they can't hope to hear.  
They don't know your talent.  
They only know your fear.  
Erasing minds, thinking they're gallant.

But time for you is running thin.  
They're growing suspicious  
There's an exception in the looney bin

Not a blank slate or empty mind  
But a colorful mass of power  
That glistens in an awakening shine  
That makes the labcoats cower

As the chaos breaks free  
And the crazies try to flee  
The warden sits back in wait  
As his special student takes the bait

So run, run, run  
The end is so much fun

So think, think, think  
You're losing your links

So fight, fight, fight  
Run quickly into the night

So bleed, bleed, bleed  
It's time to pay for your deeds

So be sure to distract like a loyal cadet  
Because now is the time to forget.

## Chapter 7: Good Souls Die Young

Like little flakes I feel my memories peeling off in a soft breeze. With every passing second the pill stretches its reach through me, grabbing onto anything it finds and then crushing it.

I've lost my mother . . . my dad's fading . . . events from when I was a child . . . where I grew up, it's all fading into a hazy fog that rises up and leaves me.

I . . . I'm forgetting what Lacey looked like.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, "Matt?"

I turn my head slowly, trying to focus on my surroundings. Trying with all of my strength to stay in reality, and not lose everything. Martinez hovers over me, showing some fear for the first time in his life. "Come on," he says forcefully, but also with some caution, "We gotta' go. Now."

He offers me his hand and I stare at it a second.

I have to do this. There's nothing I can do at this point. Dr. Warren's pill is already doing it's work, and I'm already disappearing. In my last moments here I have to hold on to memories that are now. I have to grasp onto Nick, and James, and the escape, and what we have to do.

I *have* to get my friends out. I don't care what happens to me after that. I have to get them out.

Not giving any attention to my dying mind, I take Martinez's hand and stand up. He gives me a confident nod and then turns to head out, silently telling me to follow.

We rush out into the hall, where our army awaits. We've actually gotten past the lounge. I look back to see utter destruction. Lights flicker under the dark red light of the alarm. I see bodies lying limp on the floor, or on tables. Everywhere.

I can't tell what's the red alarm light, what's blood and guts. I turn my head away from the carnage, knowing that there are good people in there. For some reason the fact hits me now. That there are those who simply just took this job because they needed it. Not because they believed in what they were doing to us all here.

But it's us or them. And it's not hard to choose us. Selfish, yeah. Dark, most definitely. But what they were giving us here was a fate worse than death. I truly believe that as it is now happening to me.

I'm suddenly enveloped in a hug, that almost knocks me off my feet. I quickly realize Nick is clinging onto me, and relief floods through me. "Thank God!" he shouts, pulling away. "I didn't know where you went!"

I laugh softly, but it comes out sounding so fake, "Good to see you, kid."

He notices instantly the change in me. He tilts his head, "What's wrong?"

I see James walk up behind Nick and I quickly decide not to tell them. They're the priority and I don't need them focusing on anything but watching out for themselves and getting out of here. That's all I want for them. That's how I'm going to spend my final moments as myself.

I shake my head, "Nothing. I'm fine." He's about to question further, but the voice of Martinez stops him.

"Let's move out men! Final stretch!" The crazies roar in approval and, moving us with their stampede, sprint down the hallway, straight for the front door.

Swept up in the chaos again, I make sure to keep an eye on James and Nick, never letting them leave my sight. Our herd of savage beasts reach the doors, and without any waiting, bursts through them, spilling out into the front courtyard of the asylum.

I haven't been out here in . . . Jesus, I can't remember how long I've been in the asylum. It's like I no longer have any memories prior to this period of my life. It's terrifying.

But I can't focus on that.

I take in the sight of the battle that lies ahead of us. The courtyard is relatively open, only scattered with statues and benches, and some bushes. Beyond it is a large hill, that leads into a dense forest. If we can get into the woods we're home free. We just run from there, and I know we'll make it. It'll be impossible for anyone to find any of us in there, as long as we don't stick too closely together.

The only problem is that between us and the woods lies an army of guards, armed and ready to shoot at us. They about equal our army. Just as the lead guard gives the command to fire Martinez screams, "Take cover!"

I grab Nick and James by their shirts and throw us down behind a relatively large statue. Bullets rain down everywhere, chipping pieces of concrete and dirt, and throwing it into the air to fall down upon us.

Martinez, behind the next statue over, waves his hand to get my attention. I turn to him and he tosses me a semi-automatic, to which I give a silent thank you back. I then start to fight back.

The other two mostly duck, and let me do the work, which I'm completely okay with. Nick fires off an occasional shot every minute or so. But I truly fight back. Crazy dodging in and out, shooting round after round at the guards blocking us from freedom. Dust is filling the air, from the statue that's slowly deteriorating in front of us.

I know I'm killing countless people right now. I know I'm hitting, I'm a good shot. I care, I really do. But not enough to stop. Not enough to let up even a little. I know that makes me sound like a monster, but honestly at this point, I no longer have a single care left in me.

I'm embracing who I am. I'm killing, and yelling in outrage, and allowing my demon to be set free. I allow it to take hold of me, turn my eyes to fire, and be a part of this bloody battle. I'm going to be gone soon anyway, so why should it matter?

This is for my friends. For their safety, and their lives that lie ahead of them. I'm too far gone to have any hope personally, but I have hope for them

Those two are going to start over, I can see it. They're going to start over, probably stick with each other, and live peacefully for the rest of their lives.

They're going to live.

So with that being my only goal in mind, I keep shooting. I fire shot after shot. Eventually the rain of bullets lets up some, and we start to move up to closer covers, dwindling the guards' numbers with every gleeful scream and roar of carnage. We lose some, yes, but not enough to really make a difference.

My mind continues to leave me as well. I'm having difficulty remembering why I'm here. What did I do before this . . . ?

It involved my wife, I think. Right? Yes. I killed her. I was bad, but not in an entire sense. I did something bad for us, so that we could live. She didn't see it my way, and I accidentally killed her in my estranged state at the time.

Yeah, that's it.

At least I still get to have *that* fun memory right now.

Suddenly Martinez screams this ear piercing, throat tearing scream, loud enough to pass over all the gunshots, "THERE'S AN OPENING! MOVE FORWARD!"

I follow his eyes with mine, and see it. The guards are taking cover behind the front gate, looking over to shoot. But right in the middle, there isn't a trace of life. Bodies are crumpled around it, but no shooting emits from it.

I'm about to shout to Martinez, question him on what to do, and how we should approach this, but I hear a guttural scream rise up from our side of the war. Inmates are charging forward without cover, breaking into sprints for the escape route. They start to drop like flies, their screams being cut off by ringings of bullets. Martinez doesn't seem to be affected though. Instead he smiles.

Oh, god . . . he's using them as cover.

He jerks his head forward to me, and starts sprinting, but keeping as close to the ground as possible. I look back at James and Nick, and tell them to follow me. Nick nods, but James looks uncertain. He's starting to break down . . .

I grab his shoulders, "Hey, hey, hey. Look at me. James, look at me." His eyes dart around frantically, but they finally rest on mine. "Just follow me okay. Plug your ears, and keep your eyes on my back. That's all I need you to do, okay? James?"

His hands are shaking, and he looks like he's about to break out in tears. Nick suddenly rushes next to him, grabbing his arm, and whispering things to him. I listen and realize he's telling him a story. I can't really make out what it is, but he's describing

a beautiful scene. Of a peaceful location in the woods, with all of us there. Hunting, and planting, and laughing. It actually starts to calm my beating heart down. Nick shoots me a look, silently telling me he's got this and to go.

I nod to him, and without any further waiting I start sprinting after Martinez, hearing the steps of James and Nick not too far behind me. Martinez's sick plan is working. A lot of the inmates are making it out with us, but so many are dying. I hear the life leaving them, their screams being cut off in sharp yelps.

I just keep running though. I run, and shoot randomly, and eventually we're at the gate. Nick helps me with getting James over, and then I help him over. I then start to climb over. I cast one more look at the asylum. Looking at the ornate, brick, building, where I've spent what seems like my whole life in. The pain and memories want to break forward, but are so scattered at this point, that they're unable to cause me much harm.

I then jump over, and balance myself when onto the other side. I see about half of our people made it. Martinez is already leading the charge towards the woods, and I see guards are starting to chase.

I quickly run forward, and push James and Nick, letting them know we have to run this very instant.

This is it.

The home stretch.

I fire back occasional shots, as we sprint with our last breaths. We actually gain some distance and before we know it, we're crossing over the crest of the hill.

We're here. A downhill sprint is all we have left. We're actually-

Suddenly a sharp pain blossoms in my skull. A deep, burning wound that takes root in the core of my brain, and slowly spreads out. What is this pill doing to me?

I cry out, and drop to my knees, my hands instantly shooting up to grab onto my head.

"Matt!" Nick calls out. He instantly moves back to me, dropping onto the ground. James calls out to Martinez, and I believe he actually runs to us, to see what's the hold up. "Matt what's wrong?!"

"I . . ." I have to tell him. I don't know what he's going to do, but there's no hiding it now, "Dr. Warren gave me a pill. They forced it into me as the fight broke out. It's . . . it's erasing my mind, Nick."

His face twists into confusion and sorrow, "What? But, you're immune!"

I shake my head, "Not to this." His face just drops. "I don't have much longer."

He starts to grab at me under my arms, trying to stand himself, "Well I'm getting you out of here. We're leaving, together, all of us. I'll keep you safe." Just as soon as he starts to lift another pain bites at my entire skull.

I cry out in agony and instantly fall back down to my knees. I'm shaking my head, the tears already starting to form. I know what has to happen. I look to . . .

I almost want to cry. What . . . what is it? John? No . . . James. James. I look to James, knowing Nick won't be able to stand listening to what I have to say, "You need to get him out of here. Now."

"What?!" Nick yells in protest.

I can see James understands. He nods solemnly. I say, with the little time I have to say it, "Thank you, James. You've been a great friend."

A single tear rolls down his cheek and he says, with a hand on my shoulder, "I'll keep him safe. Thank *you*, Matt. For everything."

I nod at him, placing my hand upon his shoulder. I press my forehead against his, and we give a quick, silent goodbye. Depressing, but . . . strangely peaceful.

Nick, however starts to yell, "No! We're NOT leaving you! James you can't listen to him, we have to take him!" James starts to argue, but Nick shouts over him.

I want to say so much to Nick. I want to say thank you. For bringing some life back into me. For brightening up the asylum a bit. For just making everything have some hope in it again. And I want to tell him to go live. To live, and write, and dream, and just have the best life possible. I know it's going to be a reality. I know it'll happen for him. I can see it.

But I know he has to go. He has to leave now, in order for his survival. So with a deep breath, I turn away from Nick, nodding at James to go.

As James nods at me and starts to try to talk to Nick I hear screaming to our right. I look over to see a man I can't place a name to. He's this very large, muscular, mexican guy. Yelling at us to move. Mid sentence a bullet cuts him off, slicing through his head, and he tumbles to the ground. Seeming to shake the Earth with his size.

I look to see James clearly shocked by this incident, but . . . I have no idea who that was.

Maybe I used to.

I just shake my head, knowing I can't think about it right now. I won't be able to think about it soon. With one final look back at my two brothers, I see some inmates helping James to pull Nick away.

Tears stream down his face, and agony twists his face into a horrible grimace. I want to go with him, but I know I can't. I know what I have to do.

I block out his ear splitting screams. I block out his cries for my name, his heart ripping display of depression. And I simply whisper to the wind, "Goodbye, kid."

I then turn to the asylum.

Before me are bright search lights, bathing me in a white light. Guards trudge up the hill, guns pointed at me, the last man standing to face them.

I think about my last memories left. All I have is Lacey, and Nick. I know there's someone with Nick right now, someone important to me, but it's faded. Blurry and I can't make it out clearly.

Nick slowly fades into the background. His light, his laugh, his personality of hope, it all goes gray. I smile softly at it finally goes dark.

What was I smiling about? I . . . something.

I take a deep breath in, hating this feeling.

And then there's just Lacey. I can't remember what happened really. I just see visions of our life together. Visions of our wedding day. Of our first kiss. Of the family parties she drug me to. Of us dancing at night, happy and content in our home, as we listened to the soft drone of classical music. Of our happiness.

I know there's more to it all, but . . . I'm glad that's all I can remember.

And then she, too, is gone.

And then suddenly . . . it all goes away.

I don't know who I am. My name, my life. Nothing. A blank slate.

My body seems to know what to do, though. I see men rushing at me. Guns raised to shoot, but I shoot mine first. I'm not even really meaning to, but I shoot bullet upon bullet at the oncoming group. They fall quickly.

And for some reason I can't explain, I start to laugh. There's something I kind of know. This feeling of accomplishment. Like I've saved someone's life just now.

I don't know . . . I just don't know.

But nonetheless, I continue to laugh in peace and fire off rounds.

Everything flashes by, and suddenly red is bursting out from *me*. I can hold out no longer.

Knowing not what it's for, but only that I am happy, I throw my gun into the air, and I spread my arms out to the wind.

I take in one final breath, and allow a smile to settle on my face. I stare up into the stars, dreaming about what will happen next, where I will go.

Still knowing that I just did something incredible.

And then I go down in a hailstorm of bullets.

## Chapter 8: Reborn

*Nick*

I'm not mad at him.

I can't be.

I wish it would've went differently. That we could've gotten out with so much more people. That we could've gotten out with Matt.

I wish they didn't ruin him. That they didn't give him that damn pill.

I wanted to die that night.

Seeing the state Matt was left in. Seeing his face not change, nor have any flicker of recognition when Martinez went down. Not even looking back as James and a few guys dragged my screaming, flailing body. It made me want to die.

Somehow I got through everything else. The killings, and carnage, and chaos. But seeing Matt break . . . seeing him literally lose his mind.

I think it almost did kill me.

But again . . . I can't be mad at him.

I can be mad at the asylum . . .at Dr.Warren, but honestly? I don't want to. I'm done with things like that. I'm done constantly feeling the sorrow. The depression. The haze of insaneness.

I'm done feeling the hate.

I'm making it a personal mission to push it all away. To forget it all, and start over. I'm also doing it for Matt.

I miss him. So, so freaking much.

That guy, I don't know what I did to deserve him. He stuck his neck out for me, from day one. And I think that speaks infinite amounts about him. It shows that through all that grime that he had. Through the webs of darkness, and evils memories, he was a good man.

A good enough man to watch after some drugged up kid, like myself, who really was a complete and total jerk to him when I first arrived at the asylum.

Matthew Barstow may be the best man I ever knew.

But I know he's in a better place now.

He gets true freedom.

Not the screwed up ways of the asylum, wiping his mind blank. But the freedom of being away from this world. From this world that's filled with so much violence, and depression, and general crap, that makes me sometimes wonder why anyone bothers living.

Matt gets to soar in the skies. Living a new life of eternity, floating wherever he pleases, doing whatever he wants, seeing whoever he desires. With a small laugh to myself, I think of him and Lacey perhaps back together up there somewhere. His wife

realizing what his intentions had been, and deciding to join him in death. The two of them together again, forever.

The laughs dissipates into a small grin, that stays there.

I sit upon a cliff outcropping, that drops down into a rushing river. The sound of the waves is a calming drone in the background as I stare off into the woods that surround us, bathed in warm sunshine, and a cool breeze. It's the definition of beauty.

Next to me is James. Reading a letter I wrote to Matt. It basically just says everything I just went over. I needed to write it. I feel a lot better now, after having done so. Writing just gets it all out for me. Takes the bad emotions and makes them something wonderful.

James smiles as he finishes it, "That's beautiful, Nick."

I smile back, taking the letter back. I then proceed to rip it to shreds. To the point that I can't even make out letters on the pieces. I then hold it out in the palm of my hand and allow the wind to take it. To pick up the little pieces, and carry them off like a fine mist.

James lets out a little laugh, "I bet he'll get it."

I shrug, "I hope so. But even if he doesn't . . . I have a feeling he knows about everything I mentioned.

James nods, "Very true. He's smart like that."

We then sit in blissful silence. Enjoying each other's company. Enjoying our scenery. But most importantly enjoying being alive.

Behind us, down the cliff is our family of loonies. Roughly one hundred made it out. Which is rather impressive, if you ask me.

We've been hiding out in the woods for about a month now. Moving every day, but never having any problems with being found. I think we made it. We actually did it.

It's amazing.

And although most of us have done bad things in our lives, terrible things. It's behind us. Our pasts . . . they're not what lies ahead.

Ahead of us is bright. Hopeful. Filled with joy and new lives.

We get to start over.

We get a second chance.

The future is going to be a wonderful thing, I can just feel it. With James at my side, all of us can do anything. It's a miracle. A wonderful miracle that was paved through a path of a lot of pain.

But everything's okay now. Because we, every single one of us, are . . .

Reborn.

***The End***