

PROGRESS, REGRESS

by

Michelle Maher

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Andrew Furman, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

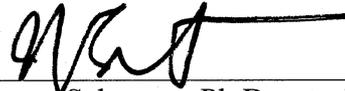
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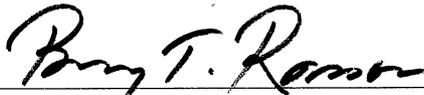
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ABSTRACT

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Progress, Regress examines the narrator's journey through the world of mental illness. Psychologist Lisa James has a new client, six-year-old Megan Cooper, who has been diagnosed with child-onset schizophrenia. Megan's young age and the severity of her illness rattle Lisa, and make her question not only her role as a psychologist and a mother, but also her own mental state.

DEDICATION

Unfortunately, there are still many stigmas regarding mental illness, so I wrote this thesis partly to contribute to the mental health field. The more information on the subject, the better, even if it's in a fictional work.

Therefore, I want to dedicate *Progress, Regress* to the mentally ill. Keep on pushing on.

PROGRESS, REGRESS

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PREFACE

Do not become emotionally attached to your clients. Professors had drilled this idea into my head in every course, during every semester, and throughout every level of my education. It's dangerous, Dr. Potter had warned me after a stressful overnight shift in the psychiatric hospital during my clinical hours as a Psy.D. Candidate. "Lisa," he'd said, "When you have clients of your own one day, you'll truly realize how hard this is. But you need to keep the client and their issues in a box. Open that box back up when you're with them, and then shut it when you aren't at work." He warned me how, otherwise, work would swamp my personal life. I deeply respected Dr. Potter and considered him my mentor throughout my dual clinical and counseling psychology doctorate studies. I did my best to put my emotions aside and focus my attention on my patients' illnesses, not their names. This may sound dispassionate, but it was all I could try to do at the time. I was tired of not sleeping, tired of not having the energy to see friends on my days off. I was tired of being stressed at home, in the car, at the store. Yet, I still continued to struggle with my emotions while away from my patients.

My ex-husband, Kevin, used to tell me the same thing: don't become attached, don't become attached. I hadn't been in a relationship for years before Kevin came along. I dated a classmate at one point, but it just didn't work out; we were both far too busy, too wrapped up in our studies. I had also dated a few other men casually, but the relationships never became more than physical, which was fine by me. The casual sex was just what I needed – it was something to take my mind off my studies and not

overwhelm the men I was seeing; they'd never understand the stresses of my job. So I'd avoided anything more than a physical relationship, until I met Kevin.

After I completed my post-graduate studies, I was hired at the psychiatric hospital in California where I formally interned. After about a year, I applied for a counseling job at a middle school in my hometown, Santa Fe. I craved the familiar buildings, especially downtown, and the semi-arid climate. I missed the snow and I missed the thunderstorms. The weather in Malibu was gorgeous, but I rarely felt the sun on my shoulders, the feel of warm sand under my feet, the smell of the salty ocean air. I was just simply too busy. I sometimes wish I had had the time to enjoy it there more than I did, but Santa Fe is my home. It reminds me of my parents.

I met Kevin online. By that point in my career, I felt I would be able to handle a relationship, if one were to come my way, as I would have steadier hours working at a school. I was still in California, but with a plan to move back to New Mexico so while on a dating website, I set my profile to allow men from New Mexico to contact me. And Kevin did, soon afterwards. We clicked right away, as we chatted almost daily, both online and over the phone, about our common interests, like skiing and spicy Mexican food. Men have always complimented me on my appearance, but as Kevin and I talked on the phone late at night, he would tell me he was looking at my pictures, and he couldn't believe how beautiful my dark green eyes were, how long my eyelashes were and how full my lips were. He also loved my hands. On my dating profile, I had three pictures: one of me grinning broadly after earning my doctorate degree, holding up my diploma. I don't remember who took that picture. Kevin loved how proudly I gripped

that diploma and he loved how soft they looked in the others. I'd never known anyone who complimented me in those ways, and we'd still never met.

He came to visit me once in California – I finally got to spend some quality time at the beach – so we could meet in person, but I got the middle school job soon after and moved in with him so we weren't apart for long. Within a year, we were engaged. We were only engaged for seven months and we ended up eloping in Las Vegas. We were spontaneous and I didn't have any family to consider, while his folks lived in Florida. During the first few years of our marriage, we were so happy and so in love. I almost didn't know what it was like to love again. We were inseparable when we weren't at work. Working at a school, my hours were fairly set, as were Kevin's. After work, we'd often go out and dance. I felt myself letting go with him.

I fell for Kevin and I fell hard. He would make me forget about the stresses at work and listened to me when I had a rough day. He always made me feel better, so my anxiety never lasted for long. We vacationed over school breaks and during the summers. It also helped that Kevin had a lucrative career, so we never worried about my over one hundred and sixty thousand dollars worth of debt. However, the anxiety I felt of seeing my schoolchildren in distress caught up with me, as the years passed. Kevin and I would lounge in bed together at night, watching reruns of our favorite game shows—Kevin preferred old-school games like *Hollywood Squares*, while I loved *Jeopardy*. He would notice me answering fewer and fewer questions and watched as my eyes glazed over as I thought about my day. We started to fight more and more, but the fights never lasted long. He would get upset that I never wanted to go out or even simply just talk to him. I was simply just too tired of all of it – too tired to go out, too

tired to talk, too tired to fight with him. I would often just nod at him as he tried to fight with me. He eventually stopped fighting with me, as he came to notice I wasn't even really listening.

When I unexpectedly became pregnant with Alex, Kevin and I had more to focus on other than our jobs, so our relationship strengthened; we bonded again. He would massage my shoulders as I breast-fed Alex and kiss me deeply on the lips whenever he could. Despite how tired we both were, we continued to make love and even went out, after finding a suitable babysitter for our son. However, our reconciled relationship didn't last long; after maternity leave, I took on more hours than ever. I had also recently started at Yukon Bay Mental Health (YBMH), an outpatient facility, about a mile away from Yukon Bay Regional Hospital. Work consumed my life. When I wasn't actually at the office, where I often remained hours after my day ended, I was on the phone with colleagues about our cases—confidentially, of course – or writing in my journal about them. I even volunteered at the hospital on my days off. I was in love with my work; it seduced me. I didn't mean to neglect my family; somehow, I didn't even realize then how little time I saw Kevin and Alex during the week.

One night, as Kevin and I ate dinner (takeout – I never had the time to learn how to cook and he had no desire to), while Alex was sleeping soundly, Kevin lost it on me. I'd been sitting there, stirring my pasta, not tasting it, staring at my plate, and thinking about work. I was thinking, specifically, about a seventeen-year-old boy named Pete, who was hospitalized after swallowing a bottle of Excedrin PM. He soon stabilized, and I began treating him while he was an inpatient at the hospital – he was only there for a day, though, as he was deemed no longer suicidal – and then he also started seeing me

in my office, as an outpatient client. He had told me earlier that day before I came home for dinner, that he had hit his mother twice in the face the morning of his suicide attempt. He'd cried and cried in my office, saying how much he loved her and didn't mean to hit her; she'd just made him "so disgustingly angry." He told me how happy he was the night before; they'd even watched a movie together before they went off to bed, but then she wouldn't give him gas money in the morning in order to get to school, so he flew into a rage and slapped her across the face and followed it with a punch to her nose. He couldn't explain why he did it; he begged me for answers as to how he could hit someone he loved, and who loved him, over gas money. His mom hadn't pressed charges against him so he was back at home with her, and he felt sick every time he saw the bruises he created on her face.

I'd diagnosed Pete with Bipolar I, and explained to him that it is a mood disorder, characterized by feelings of extreme highs and lows. I prescribed him Lamictal, an anticonvulsant, commonly used to treat bipolar disorder. New Mexico is one of two states in the United States (Louisiana being the other) where psychologists can prescribe medicine so I had much more control of my clients in there than I had in California; I didn't need to check in with psychiatrists or compare notes.

I didn't want to leave Pete but I was only allowed an hour with him. He was supposed to go to group therapy at the hospital around the time I was to leave work for the night. He begged me not to leave him and I finally calmed him down enough for him to go to Group; I even followed him there to make sure he made it okay. I then cried briefly in my car on the way home. I wanted to understand Pete's rage and I couldn't. I could put a diagnosis on it, prescribe him medicine that may or may not

work, but that wouldn't help how he was feeling that day, at that time. And I thought about his mother. It was all beyond frustrating but I was desperate to help him.

“Goddamnit, Lisa! Can you just pay attention to me for once?” Kevin had yelled at dinner, standing and throwing his plate of lasagna into the sink, the plate smashing and lasagna splashing onto the counter and floor. “I’m beyond sick of this. You never, ever ask me how I am,” he continued to rant. “You don’t give a shit about me. Just admit it. All you care about is yourself and your job.”

I stared at him. I tried to open up my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Kevin initiated our divorce, officially citing irreconcilable differences in the paperwork, and told me that my “issue” with work interfering with home was one of the biggest reasons he wanted the divorce. He never actually said I wasn’t a good wife, or a good mother to Alex, but I knew he always somewhat felt that way.

After the divorce went through, I felt an extreme amount of guilt and embarrassment. I didn’t mean to put my patients ahead of my family; I loved Alex with all my heart. I somehow just put it into my head that my son was healthy and had two loving parents, while most of the clients I’d worked with needed me more than Kevin and Alex did at the time. I had no right to make that assumption and I’ll always regret it. Kevin and I have joint custody of Alex and when I’m with him now, I always try to be *with* him.

Now, even deeper into my career, at age 33, long after the divorce, even though I realize that I no longer have any friends, save from work, and even knowing full well that my 60-70 hour work weeks (I often come to work early and leave late, unless it’s

my week with Alex) make me so tired that I often go to bed right after work, I can't allow myself to be "just another doctor" to my patients and forget about them when I'm not at work. I can't be someone who quickly checks notes on her patients' last sessions before calling them into her office, as many psychologists do. These people struggle, often alone, without strong interpersonal relationships or family to fall back on. They trust me with their deepest secrets and fears. I find it nearly impossible not to think about their problems as I lay my head down on my pillow to fall asleep.

Thirteen and a half hours have passed since the Coopers left my office and I still can't get my new patient, 6-year-old Megan, Tom and Kelly's daughter, out of my head.

When the Coopers first arrived at my office earlier this afternoon, Megan was the first one through the door. She ran over to my desk, then to the window, and eventually plopped onto my carpet, sitting cross-legged.

"Well, hi there," I said to her, looking down at the top of her small, blond head.

Megan didn't answer. Her parents looked at me. I smiled. Megan's father, Tom, said hello. Kelly pursed her lips into a tight smile.

"It's nice to officially meet you," I said to them. "Please, sit down anywhere." Besides my desk, my office has two additional chairs and a loveseat. My clients often sit in one of the corner chairs, as far away from my desk as possible. The Coopers chose to sit next to one another on the loveseat. I closed the door.

"If you don't mind," I said to them, "I'm going to talk to Megan and you guys can just listen, watch us interact."

"Okay," Tom said. "Thanks."

I sat down on the floor next to Megan.

“Hi there,” I said again, tilting my head down slightly to look into her face. She wouldn’t look at me; she was seemingly entranced by something on the beige carpet.

“What are you doing?” I asked her as she poked it.

“Nothin’,” she replied.

“Well, I’m Lisa, your new doctor,” I told her. “I’ve been wanting to meet you for awhile now.”

“What do you want to talk about?” Megan had asked me. She clearly knew the routine.

“You. Tell me about you,” I said, wanting her to make eye contact with me. She did for just a moment. Then she spoke.

“‘Hit her hard.’ That’s what Tristen Susie told me. So I hit Mollie on her legs. Tristen Susie is the mean one. Daddy said hitting was bad, especially since Mollie is just a baby. So I stopped hitting Mollie even though I still wanted to. Then I saw fuzzy wuzzies on the curtains. I tried to get them off ‘cause Mama doesn’t like fuzzy wuzzies. Mama pulled me off the curtains. She was mad. Then Mama said we should go outside and play because it’s a beautiful day out. I said ‘Okay,’ ‘cause Tristen Marie told me we could go swimming in the pool. Mama likes when I go swimming ‘cause she can sit in the sun and read her magazines and get a tan. Then—”

“Why is Tristen Susie the meanest one?” I interrupted her; she was talking so fast and I was taken aback. I wasn’t expecting that and was alarmed. I had no idea who Tristen Susie and Tristen Marie were but I knew Megan’s schizophrenia caused her to

have hallucinations so I assumed that she wasn't talking about real children when referring to them.

“Cause she tells me to hit Mollie and if I don't, she hurts me. She hurts me other times, too. Tristen Susie is the mean one.”

Megan then began furiously scratching at her face. I quickly pulled her hands away on reflex, and once I'd let go of them, she immediately started scratching again, this time at her eyes. I grabbed her small, callused hands again and tried to study Megan's eyes but she wouldn't make eye contact. She stared at my hands on hers and then her body seemed to relax—she slumped slightly and her hands loosened up. I felt a strong sense of relief, but I couldn't understand why it seemed as if she was trying to scratch her eyes out; I was just happy she stopped. I released her hands and reached over to my toy shelf and picked up a brunette Barbie doll to get her attention. She ignored the doll and me and resumed scratching at her eyes.

“How does Tristen Susie hurt you?” I'd asked her, reaching for her hands. She jerked away, nearly slapping me across the face in the process.

Kelly let out an uncomfortable cough. I glanced at her. She picked at a thumbnail, crossed her legs and then quickly uncrossed them. She sat on her hands.

“So, Megan, you mentioned Tristen Susie and Tristen Marie. Are there any other Tristens?” I asked, turning my attention back to Megan. She was looking at the floor.

“Tristen Elizabeth, Tristen Cassandra. And Tristen Marie and Tristen Susie,” she said, as if on autopilot.

“Wow, that's a lot of Tristens,” I said, making my eyes wide.

“They’re identical twins. Quadruplets,” she responded.

“Wow,” I said again. “And they all look alike? How do you tell them apart?” I was desperate to keep her attention.

She scratched at her eyes. “By their shirts. Tristen Elizabeth wears an E on her shirt. Tristen Susie wears an S on hers. Tristen—“

“Is there something in your eye, Megan?” I asked. I hated to break the conversation, but I needed her to stop hurting herself. As if I wasn’t there, she stood up and walked over to Tom, who was still sitting silently next to his wife. He scooped her up but she immediately wiggled her way out of his arms and ran to my office window.

“Megan. Come here. I just want to talk to you for a minute,” I’d said to her back. Tom jumped up as she tried to jimmy open the window. He pulled her away and she howled in annoyance.

“Tom,” Kelly said, as she stood up and walked towards the door. “I should go check on Mollie.”

“I need you here. You need to be here,” Tom responded, frustrated, as he continued to try and keep Megan away from the window.

“No, no. It’s okay,” I said, rising from my cross-legged position on the rug. “We could use a break, huh, Megan?” I looked at my watch—it’d been only about fifteen minutes since the session began.

Megan ran over to me.

“You’re pretty,” she said in a sweet voice. She swiped at her slightly greasy blond hair and met my eye for a second.

“Thank you. You’re very pretty, too,” I said, smiling. “I like your curly hair.”

She stood still for a moment, seemingly contemplating what I'd said, and then ran over to my desk and started playing with some ballpoint pens. I took them out of her hands. I should have put those in my drawer before the Coopers arrived. Lillian told me Megan tried stabbing herself with a pen a few months back. I was frustrated with myself for being so careless.

"I really should check on Mollie," Kelly said to me, frowning.

"Tell you what," I started, trying desperately to sound upbeat as I attempted to guide Megan to the door. She struggled and then ran to it on her own. "I think we're done for the day. Megan seems to want to go home. Unless you want to sit down and talk again?" I looked at Megan. "You started to tell me about the Tristens?"

She acted as if she didn't hear me. I wondered if maybe she couldn't. Maybe the voices in her head were too loud.

"Well, um, thanks for taking the time to stop in so we could finally meet in person," I'd said to the Coopers as we walked into the hallway. "I'm sorry it was so brief. But give me a call either tonight or tomorrow. I'll come to you this time."

"Thanks, Dr. James," Tom said, flashing me a tight smile. Kelly left to pick up Mollie, Megan's 11-month-old sister, from Lillian, who was watching her in her office.

"Please, call me Lisa," I said, smiling back at him.

Megan ran to the elevator and Tom proceeded to chase after her. Just before Megan got to the elevator doors, she caught my eye and stared intently. My throat caught. She then gave me a crooked smile and I noticed her front teeth were growing in. I was thrown. Lillian said that Megan rarely shows positive emotions, and that she

smiles even less. I smiled back at her, excited and invigorated. I can do this job, I thought.

Tom pulled Megan into the elevator. I heard her scream. The elevator door closed. After I briefly met little Mollie and said goodbye to Kelly, I went to Lillian's office.

"That was quick," Lillian had said, looking slightly concerned. "She's quite the handful, huh?"

"Just a little," I said with a smile. I sighed and sat down across from her at her desk. "That poor little girl. And her parents. They looked exhausted. I can't say I blame them. I was in there with her for about fifteen minutes; they're with her all day and night."

"She's a sweet little Tasmanian devil, that one," Lillian had said. "A sweet little sick one. More than a handful, as you saw." Lillian looked at me, pushing up her glasses. "So, what do you think?" She'd asked me. "Think you want to handle this case?"

"Yes, definitely. I'm excited." I didn't mention I was also scared.

I picked up a copy of the *DSM-IV Training Guide for Diagnosis of Childhood Disorders* from the corner of her desk and flipped through it, even though I have three of my own copies. "I think today went well, despite how little time I had with her. I told Tom to call me so we can set something up at the home as soon as possible."

"Good idea," Lillian said. "You need to see how she reacts in an environment she's most used to."

“She looked at me, Lil,” I said suddenly, excitedly. “Like, really looked at me. And then she smiled. It was intense. You know that’s not supposed to happen too often with schizophrenics! She was engaged, even if it was just for a second or two.”

“Sounds positive,” Lillian responded, raising an eyebrow slightly.

“Yeah,” I said, placing the *DSM* back on her desk. “Well, um, I’ll let you know how it goes when I see her again, which sounds like it may be tomorrow.”

“If you do it before noon, I can stop by,” Lillian said to me.

“Thanks. But I think I’ll go by myself. I need to be able to handle her on my own at least the first time I’m there for them to ever consider me for the job.” I stood to leave.

“Good idea,” Lillian said. “Plans for tonight?”

“Nah,” I stretched my arms over my head, feeling exhausted. “Kevin has Alex this week. I think I’m just going to stay in and catch up on some reading.”

“You’ll be great, kiddo.” When Lillian said kiddo, I knew it was time to get moving.

I smiled broadly, went into my office and shut the door behind me. I walked over to the window and looked outside, nearly tripping over a couple of crayons that Megan had been playing with, while I stared at nothing in particular.

I lie here in bed, thinking about what I know in regards to Megan’s diagnosis. She was diagnosed just a few months before her fifth birthday by a group of psychiatrists after a long-extended psychiatric hospital stay. She’d been admitted there a few times before for constant hallucinations, social withdrawal (she was going to

preschool at one point), constantly hitting her parents and trying to injure herself. And yet, she was not yet diagnosed.

The reason for the delay in her diagnosis, I imagine, is because child-onset schizophrenia is extremely difficult to diagnose, as it's very uncommon and also because there are so many other diagnoses that need to be ruled out first, such as autism. Many of Megan's symptoms are, indeed, symptomatic with autism, but many of them are not, such as her violent hallucinations. The reason that Megan was taken to the hospital that final time was not only because she was still exhibiting the same symptoms as before, she was also switching from extreme phases of paranoia to catatonia. Kelly had also just given birth to Mollie only a month before. Megan was posing as a threat to Mollie's life and her own. She'd told Tom that her "friend," Tristen Susie, said that if Megan didn't kill Mollie, that Megan would have to take her own life by drowning herself in the bathtub.

CHAPTER 1

In the morning, I stop at Dunkin' Donuts before I head over to the Coopers' and order a large latte with an extra espresso shot. I sit down at a table outside and blow into the coffee, but it's still too hot. I breathe in the warm air around me – it's almost 70 degrees, an absolutely beautiful day – and fight the urge to rest my head on the table. I'm exhausted. Megan, her parents, and my divorce weren't the only things on my mind last night, as I tossed and turned; I also thought about Lillian.

At 64, Lillian is not only leaving her job at YMBH, where we work with patients of all ages and deal with many spectrums of mental illness, including severe ones, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder—she is preparing her retirement. She was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer back in April, a little over two months ago, and decided to forgo chemotherapy so she would not spend the last year of her life sick and unable to function both physically and mentally. She wants to spend as much time of those last few years that she can with her two children and three grandchildren. (She divorced her husband decades ago and he remarried—they have not kept in touch.) Along with some of my other coworkers, I am taking on her clients. She doesn't want to leave them without care until they are comfortable with their new doctors. Lillian specifically asked me, based on my experience and thorough schooling, to take Megan's case, who I'd actually be going to do both home and office visits with. Lillian said she couldn't trust a case as serious as this one with anyone else, especially because of Megan's age. I immediately said yes, mainly because I didn't want to let her down.

Though technically Lillian and I are coworkers, I have always, in a way, looked at her as my boss. She's worked at YBMH for 32 years and when I started there, she immediately took me under her wing and has been a mentor to me ever since. There really isn't a boss where we work, though we always are, of course, supervised, and so my other coworkers always look to her for advice and guidance when needed, as well; it's as if she's the grandmother of YBMH. She's seemingly all-knowing and while she is often unnecessarily kind and helpful, she knows how to turn on her strict side. No one wants to be on Lillian's bad side nor embarrass himself or herself in front of her.

So when Lillian asked me to take on Megan's case, I couldn't help but be pleased and feel honored. She had confided in me once that one of her patients, a very young girl with the most severe schizophrenia she's ever encountered, was one of her most difficult cases, if not the most. Megan is the youngest patient at YBMH and I'd made the assumption that she was whom I'd be working with.

My first time working with a young person with schizophrenia was at the psychiatric hospital back in California where I held an internship that turned into a job post-graduation. The patient's name was Chelsie and she was thirteen when I first met her. During all my years both interning and working at the hospital, I'd met so many different patients there. They usually came and went quickly if they were there for something like substance abuse or a suicide attempt. In those cases, patients usually go from inpatient to outpatient fairly quickly. So I rarely got to really see my patients, really experience them. When you allow yourself to understand your patients, or try to, anyway, they become more than just patients—they have names, faces, backgrounds.

Chelsie needed the most attention from those of us working. Chelsie had catatonic schizophrenia and she'd been an inpatient at the hospital since she was twelve. Tomography scans showed that even though she was so young, her brain showed severe damage; like others with catatonic schizophrenia, her nerve cells had rapidly reduced in size. She barely spoke; when she did open her mouth, she usually can only grunt or cry out. She'd sit in the same seat in the common room, a chair up against the window and the one closest to the telephone. She wouldn't move for hours. We often had to basically pick her up in order to get her to the lunchroom or take her to bed. We brought her meds to her and dragged her to Group. We did anything we could to keep her around others, in the hopes that she'd talk and then we could try and understand her as best as we could. She would, on rare occasions, start singing. She sometimes sang "The Wheels on the Bus" quietly, alone in her room. I would go in to check on her and I'd sing a little with her, almost as if I was singing a bedtime song to her. However, she'd often just stop singing without warning. Then, there was complete stillness. Catatonic schizophrenics don't sleep when they go completely mute, but, instead, slip into a daze, usually brought on by fear. I didn't know if or why I was frightening Chelsie, but I'd stop singing and, instead, tidy up her room as she stared up at the wall.

I'd wondered what Chelsie's earlier years were like. The doctors whom I worked with the most, Cora and Amber, told me that if the words "Dad" or "Father" ever were spoken to or in front of Chelsie, she would cover her ears and scream until she fell back into catatonia, usually hours later. Cora told me that sometimes Chelsie would mumble "Hands, hands, hands" over and over just before she'd freeze. I never witnessed any of this. I didn't want to; I feared that something may have happened

between her and her father but I would never verbalize that. How could I know? I knew nothing about her family.

Chelsie's parents, who never came to visit her—they just paid for her care—had three other children, all of whom were free from mental illness. I didn't know much about them but the insurance company told us that they didn't have insurance and were getting funds through various mental health groups to help Chelsie stay at the facility, since it's a private facility and not a non-profit. Even still, I felt as if Chelsie's parents gave up on her. She was overweight and needed new clothes; the small wardrobe she had didn't fit – her shirts were constantly riding up on her. Couple that with the fact that she was always looking into space or talking to people and things that weren't there, and you can imagine how the other teenagers (and even some adults) at the hospital made fun of her—they stuck food in her hair and giggled loudly at her as she sat aimlessly at the window. She didn't seem to have any idea, though.

It was clear that Chelsie liked me. The first time we really interacted was when I was making up a bed for a patient soon to arrive. I hadn't even heard Chelsie come into the room but all of a sudden, I was on my back on the bed, the weight of Chelsie fully on top of me. I was frightened but I quickly realized she was simply hugging me. I was in shock, and watched Chelsie climb off me and slowly wander out of the room. I'd lain there for a minute, and then ended up crying silently, alone in the room. The girl had no one to love and it seemed as if she was looking for someone, even that deep into her psychosis. And I had no right to love her. Maybe care, but not love.

As I got to know her better, though, as we sang or just sat together silently, I knew I loved her. She'd sit next to me at dinner and used to come out of her room at

night to see me while I was working the main desk. The doctors, nurses or other interns would tell her sternly not to leave the room, but Chelsie couldn't hear them. I could only watch, night after night, them drag Chelsie back to her room as she wailed. I wanted to hold her in my arms, rock her back and forth, as my mother used to do with me when I cried.

Whenever family visit time came around, I made sure Chelsie and I were separate from the others. We'd sit in her room and I would sing my favorite songs to her. Sometimes she just stared at my face, stared right into my eyes. I felt so distant from her, though, since I couldn't break through the concrete walls of her schizophrenia, but I wanted her to know she had me. She may not have had her parents, but she had me. I was her family.

Luckily, Megan Cooper's family situation is completely different from Chelsie's. Tom and Kelly are both wealthy, and they can pay out of pocket for her hospital stays, if their insurance hits its cap. They can also afford a doctor to work with their daughter one-on-one; Megan is simply just too much for them to take care of on their own, especially as she's become violent and they have another young child to watch. The Coopers refuse to put Megan in a psychiatric facility again—they have had to do so four times already when Megan's schizophrenia got too out of control for them to handle. They eventually got to the point where they just couldn't stand having her there, and away from them. Instead of hospitalizing her again, they have chosen to hire a psychologist trained specifically for cases like Megan's and to have that doctor come to them. It was a much better option for them to have her at home, being taken care of there, and not away from them at a facility.

Tom and Kelly worked with Lillian for a little over a year until she informed them that she was retiring. Megan's schizophrenia seems to worsen as she ages (which is the case with most schizophrenics), as she is falling further and further into her psychosis, and so the three of them decided that Megan still needed a one-on-one doctor; they couldn't afford to give up that luxury. My first meeting with Megan yesterday clearly confirms Lillian's warning that her illness is often overbearing so I am taking on fewer cases in order to sufficiently handle Megan's. I'm still wary about taking on the case, but I've told Lillian that I will, at the very least, give it a shot and see where it goes. Lillian means so much to me; she hired me, she understands me, and we respect one another. I'm doing it for her.

I'm also doing it for Chelsie. To this day, I still miss her. When I'd quit my job at the hospital to move back to Santa Fe, I thought it was best not to say goodbye to her; it probably just would have confused or upset her. It was also just too hard for me. I'd seen so many patients come and go, some improved, some the same as they came in. But Chelsie would never get better, and I knew that. Her schizophrenia was just too severe, too untreatable. The last memory I have of her is of her slumped over in the chair, her food-stained shirt clinging to her stomach.

CHAPTER 2

I gulp down the remainder of my latte as I pull up to the Coopers' house. I still feel anxious, but I'd gotten myself to relax a bit on the car ride there while singing along to the radio's mix of 80s and 90s music. However, my guard remains up, as there are a lot of unknowns about the afternoon ahead. Kelly and Tom are clearly very hands-on, so it's almost as if I'm taking on three new patients, rather than just one.

I walk up to the front door. I can't believe the size of this house.

The Coopers live in Rio Rancho, about 30-40 minutes away from my place in Santa Fe. Theirs is about twice the size as mine, and includes a 3-car garage. I later see that they have four bedroom and three full bathrooms, one half. The landscaping around the stucco-synthetic Adobe is gorgeous. The lawns are lush and green. Their bushes are trimmed into perfect diamond shapes. The driveway looks freshly paved and the trees surrounding the house give it plenty of privacy, yet anyone can still see how beautiful the custom finishes and generous windows are. I ring their doorbell.

The maroon door swings open. Kelly stands there, holding Mollie.

"Hi Dr. James, thanks for coming." She holds the door open for me with one arm.

"Call me Lisa. And of course, thanks for having me. Hi, Mollie," I say, taking hold of her hand and giving it a little shake. She doesn't really speak yet; Lillian informed me that Megan was speaking full sentences at 11 months. Mollie grabs onto her mother and buries her face into her shoulder.

“Megan’s been asking about you. She seems to be quite taken with you.” Kelly looks at me in a way I can’t read but her tone makes me think she’s annoyed. I’m not surprised; Lillian says that parents of children with schizophrenia become increasingly wary of the people they let their child interact with.

“Great,” I say, pretending not to catch her tone. “Where is she?”

“Tom!” Kelly shouts. I jump. Not a good sign for someone preparing to deal with a severely schizophrenic child. I regain my composure before Kelly turns back to me.

“Hey, Lisa,” Tom says, coming into the hallway with Megan, who is skipping happily. She looks at me almost shyly, and then scratches at her scalp and stares at something behind me. I fight the urge to look back, though I suspect she’s looking at something no one else but she can see.

“I really hate to do this,” Kelly says to me, “but I need to get some groceries while I can; Megan’s a very finicky eater. Tom and Megan will show you around. I’ll be back soon.” Still holding onto Mollie, Kelly grabs her purse off a small table near the door, and kisses Megan goodbye on the cheek. Megan immediately swipes at her cheek and drops to the ground to inspect what I suspect is dust.

“Be back soon,” Kelly says again, closing the door behind her loudly.

“She didn’t sleep well last night,” Tom says to me in an apologetic tone, leading me into the stunning white kitchen with cherry wood cabinets and drawers and hardwood floors. Megan runs in behind us.

“No problem,” I take off my jacket. “How are you?” I ask Tom. “Beautiful kitchen, by the way,” I say, trying not to gape.

“Thanks,” Tom says, patting the countertop. “I’m doing all right, doing all right.” He smiles. “It’s nice to have the afternoon off I’m enjoying these half-days.”

Tom got off work early so he can be here with us.

“I’ll bet,” I say to him. “You work down in Albuquerque right?”

“Yeah, it’s a bit of a drive but I don’t mind the commute,” He looks at Megan and back up at me. “The quiet, you know?”

I smile at him and then I lean down in front of Megan, who has been jumping up and down next to us.

“Hey, Megan. Remember me? My name is Lisa and I’m going to play with you for awhile.”

Megan ignores me and continues jumping. “I wanna go outside!” She says to her dad.

“Let’s show Lisa around the house and then we can go outside. You can show her your room and the pictures we made of the puppies and kitties. Okay, pumpkin?”

Tom leans down and pulls Megan to her feet.

“No! Outside!” Megan runs away from us to the back door that leads to a balcony. Tom and I follow her.

“We can go outside for awhile. Your daddy tells me you guys have a big pool!” Tom told me last night on the phone, while we set up a time for me to do my home visit, that Megan loved to swim.

“Come on,” she says to me. I follow Megan and Tom. Tom unlocks the door, the patio, and then the gate and Megan runs to the pool. The Coopers’ backyard is, of course, gorgeous. A granite pathway leads to a large underground pool and the patio is

adorned with beautiful orange and purple flowers. Large trees and the gated fence give the yard plenty of privacy.

“Do you like to swim?” I ask Megan as Tom and I stop in front of the pool.

“Yes. I can swim in the deep end if someone is with me.”

“Wow!” I say. “Maybe you can show me someday. I love to swim.”

“I like your dress,” Megan says, as she slides her bangs to the side.

“Thank you,” I respond, smoothing down my navy wrap dress, feeling somewhat self-conscious with Tom standing there.

“It’s pretty,” Megan says, looking to my right. “Tristen Marie thinks so, too.”

“Is Tristen Marie here?” I ask, looking to my right. No one is there. I look up at Tom and he’s looking down at Megan. He’s used to the invisible Tristens standing nearby; he doesn’t need to look.

“She says your hair is nice, too,” Megan responds and then runs to the other side of the pool.

“Megan, stay with us,” Tom says. We follow her.

The rest of the afternoon goes by surprisingly smoothly—not that I had much of an idea what to expect. As I’m getting ready to leave, Tom tells that it’s been a very good day for Megan. After our time at the pool, we’d gone back inside and played Monopoly. I can’t believe that she was able to fully comprehend the game. When she mentioned luxury tax, and later told me to “go to jail,” I was shocked. I was blown away by her genius. She really struggled to pay attention to the game, though. Tom and I had to tell her it was her turn at least two dozen times.

I also noticed how perfect her diction is and she is unbelievably astute when it comes to conversations about her psychosis; she clearly knows she is a schizophrenic. After years of countless trips to doctor's offices and dozens of both short and lengthy hospital stays, her parents really had no choice but to inform her of her disease, despite how young she is. Megan is very interested in her schizophrenia. Once back inside the house, she showed me her slew of medications with pride (Lithium, clozapine and Thorazine – all of which is prescribed to her in dosages that are larger than most adults with her illness could handle) and talks of her hallucinations knowing that they are caused by her schizophrenia.

Lillian says her hallucinations are almost always present in her mind; she talks to them like she knows they aren't real but has no choice but to interact with them and let them tell her what to do. I'm anxious to see that side of her schizophrenia so I can assess it and try to help her manage her hallucinations, but I'm also frightened—I don't want to see her in even more distress than she already is.

“Want a fry, Mom?” my four-year-old son, Alex, asks me a few hours later, holding a ketchup-covered French fry in his hand.

“No thanks, sweetie. I have my own.” I smile at my son as he shrugs and eats the fry.

Alex and I go out to Friendly's every Tuesday night whether it's Kevin's week with him or mine; it's our tradition. Alex loves to get these special Kids' Menu chicken fingers kabobs and I usually stick with a good, old-fashioned grilled cheese.

As I watch my son happily switch between eating his meal and coloring on his placemat, I'm still distracted by the thought of Megan. She has a sweet side that I was surprised to see. For a snack, Tom gave her her favorite cookie – oatmeal raisin – and yet, she tried to give it to me. She also kept playing with my hair and telling me how much she loves the color. “It’s like the sun,” she said.

As Alex colors a cloud green and red, Dr. Potter’s warning about being too attached popped into my head.

I literally shake my head, trying to shake away my thoughts about Megan. I look at Alex.

“So, tell me more about your day, sweetie,” I ask him, leaning over the grabbing the ketchup bottle. I like my fries loaded in ketchup.

“I don’t know. It was just fine,” Alex replies. “Ew, Mom, you use way too much ketchup,” he says with a disgusted face, as I put an entirely red fry in my mouth.

I stick out my tongue at him, fry and ketchup exposed.

“Ewww!” He says, laughing. I laugh with him.

“No, so really,” I say. “Tell me something.”

“Um.” Alex thinks. “Dad and Trina are taking me to the science museum tomorrow! I told you that, right?”

Trina is Kevin’s wife. They married nine months ago. Before that, they dated about four months, I think. Kevin, apparently, still likes to rush relationships. Trina doesn’t have any children of her own. I know her only casually; I talk to her briefly when I pick up Alex and I spoke with her for a short time during the holidays. She seems perfectly nice, but it’s weird to think of Kevin being married to anyone but me,

even though we've been divorced for years now and even though I see and talk to him so little.

"Yes, you did!" I say to Alex, trying to appear excited. "What are you going to do there?"

"Everything."

"Well, what are you looking forward to the most?"

"Everything."

I've taken Alex to the museum four times in his four years, though we haven't been there in months. I know what he likes.

"How about the Experiment Bar?" I ask him, referring to the rocks and minerals exhibit.

"Sure," he says. "I want dessert, Mom." Though Alex, like most other 4-year-olds, has a short attention span, I can't help but compare him to Megan. When he talks to me, he looks at me. He changes the subject because he wants to, not because he is confused or is told to by a hallucination. I want to hug him. I'm so blessed to have a happy, healthy child.

Our waitress comes over, holding her pad expectantly. She must have heard Alex. "Are you two ready for some ice cream?"

"No, we're still working on dinner, thanks," I tell her, while looking at Alex. "We're not in a rush."

The young waitress shrugs her shoulders and walks away, annoyed.

"Finish your dinner first," I tell him. "You have a lot of chicken left."

“Fine,” he says, begrudgingly. “But you need to eat all of your dinner, first, too, Mom. Have we got ourself a deal?”

I laugh. He is so cute. I want to lean over and ruffle his slightly long blond hair.

“Yes we’ve got *ourselves* a deal,” I say. “How are you getting along with Trina?” I ask him casually. I never really talk to Alex much about her, but I feel like doing so now. I picture her holding hands with my son as they walk around the museum. That thought really irritates me.

“What do you mean?” Alex replies.

“I just mean, how have you guys been getting along? She’s nice, right?” I don’t know why I’m saying this. I know he likes her and she’s nice to him.

“Yeah, she’s the best,” Alex says, his mouth full of chicken.

“Don’t eat with your mouth open,” I snap at him. He looks at me surprised, and then swallows his food.

“Is she better than me?” I ask him, teasingly, yet I feel my heart thud against my chest.

“No, Mom,” he says, exaggeratingly. “You’re better. She’s just Trina. But I like her.” He pauses. “Do you like her?”

“Of course, of course,” I say, relaxing. “She’s very nice. Okay, let’s get some dessert,” I say, looking around for the waitress. Now I’m the one rapidly changing the subject.

“Do you miss Dad?” Alex asks me, catching me by surprise. He was only just over a year old when Kevin and I divorced. “I mean, do you still like him?” he says,

holding onto the table in front of him. This is the first time he's ever asked me something like this. I, unintentionally, brought it on.

"What do you mean, honey?" I ask him. "Of course I still like your father."

"Well, just because you're divorced and stuff," Alex says casually, looking at the dessert menu.

"Alex, honey," I say, taking his hand. "Divorce is tricky. But it just means you get to live in two different houses and you get to have a mommy and daddy who love you very much. You're pretty lucky."

"I'm going to get a vanilla," Alex says, dropping my hand.

"A vanilla sundae or just vanilla ice cream?" I ask him, wanting to hold him again.

"Ice cream."

"Okay, sweetie."

"What are you getting, Mom?"

I order the same thing.

I sit in bed, shortly after dropping Alex back off at his father's, reading through some old textbooks, remembering the theories of Harold Searls and Abraham Maslow that I engrossed myself with while in school. I was sad to have to say goodbye to Alex. I don't want to be at home, alone. I want to be a fly on the wall and see how Alex and Trina interact. I don't know why I suddenly feel so paranoid and anxious. I've never really talked in detail to Alex about my divorce with Kevin; he is only four. But I got

the sense tonight at the restaurant that Alex has been hearing more about it from Kevin and/or Trina and I don't know why or in what context.

I put the textbooks back on their bookshelf; I have three bookshelves – two for textbooks and one for any other books. I look through the bookshelf without the textbooks. Other than the *Hunger Games* books, which I've been trying to read, but always seem to get distracted and have put them away, I haven't had a chance to read so many of these books that I've been dying to, like Laura and Lisa Ling's *Somewhere Inside* or Lauren Hillenbrand's *Unspoken*. I've always been fascinated with foreign affairs, war, and especially, survival. I put them away and tell myself I'll read one this weekend, though I know I probably won't. I sit down at the kitchen table, where I quickly eat through half a box of Cheez-its. I'm not even hungry. I put the open box on the counter, shut off the lights off in the kitchen and my room, and lie down in bed. I'm stressed but I tell myself I can handle it. My son loves me, I will try to help Megan, and I will make Lillian proud. I sleep through most of the weekend.

CHAPTER 3

It's Monday morning, and I'm already in the office by 7:15 a.m., despite the fact that my first client doesn't arrive until 8 a.m. or later. Trina drops Alex off at pre-school on Monday mornings after Kevin's had Alex for the week. I do the same when it's my week with him. I'll be picking up Alex this afternoon, after he gets out of daycare.

I say hello to a few coworkers, the few, who like me, tend to come into work earlier than they need to. Paula, who works the front desk, informs me that Lillian called out sick. I hope she's okay. I head into my office and text Lillian. She texts me back, saying she's feeling sore and tired, but okay. I write that I hope she feels better and leave it at that. She asks me to call her later.

I'll have to get my first client of the day, Brian, a 26-year-old graduate student with Bipolar II and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, from the waiting room in about forty-five minutes. I haven't seen Brian in a few weeks but I remember what our last session was like without needing to consult my notes. He's been having trouble keeping up with the pressures of graduate school so I'm going to continue talking with him about coping mechanisms. He has self-harm issues and I need to steer him away from that.

I step into the waiting room to get Brian. He's alone. He looks up at me and gives me a half smile.

"Come on in," I say to him and lead him into my office.

He's not too talkative this morning. I try to get him to talk about how he's feeling and how school is going and he just shrugs.

"Just stressed," he says, cupping his chin in his hand.

"I prefer not to bring this up right away," I start. "But I'm worried about you. Are you still cutting?" He's wearing a New Mexico State University sweatshirt so I can't see his arms.

He doesn't respond but pulls up his sleeves. I lean over to look. His arms are covered in dried blood and bruises.

"Brian," I say to him, "These cuts are getting deeper. And you're dangerously close to your veins. I have to tell you how concerned I am about your safety. Are you feeling suicidal?" I keep my voice steady and I look him straight in the eyes.

"Not now. But I have been." He rolls down his sleeves and leans back in his chair.

"When?" I ask him.

"This weekend."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to write my goddamned thesis and it's so shitty," he responds, his voice rising. "It's so shitty, Lisa," he says, quietly. His tone tears through me.

"I'm sure it's not, Brian. You were making progress on it the last time you were here. And you felt more optimistic about it. And also, in general."

"You know how my moods change," he says.

“Yes, but right now, I fear for your safety,” I say. “I thought you were going to try the ice cubes.” Those who self-cut generally do so to control their mental suffering; cutting themselves is a release, both physically and mentally. I often tell my clients who self-cut to hold ice cubes in their hands when they feel like injuring themselves. It’s a safer method of what psychologists call parasuicidal behavior. You can control your pain and it’s not nearly as dangerous. So far, nothing has helped stop Brian’s desire to cut; he’s tried exercising, taking walks, painting... but he says the cutting is the only thing that works. He says he doesn’t do it for attention, which I believe, as he always wears long sleeves, even in the heat. Instead, it makes him feel in charge and it makes him feel good. The chemistry in the brain literally changes when the body reacts to pain. But I need to try and continue to get him to stop, before he slices open a vein or decides to go further and kill himself.

But Brian has shut himself off today. He tells me he tried the ice cube method but I’m not sure he actually did. He tells me he’ll be fine, that he’s just incredibly stressed. I hate to steer someone away from personal success, but I remind him again that he can always take some time off from school. His health is more important than his degree right now. He nods, but I don’t think he believes me. His parents are apparently really hard on him. His father is very successful, as is his older brother, so he feels that he must meet up to their “standards.” I tell him constantly that he is his own person; he’s 26 and has the right to make his own decisions and that he should.

Sometimes, but not today, Brian listens. He’ll go months without cutting, gets good grades, and then he slips. He blames it on his medications, that they don’t work. But he’s on Lithium, which is often considered the best drug for suicidal tendencies and

self-harm. I also have him on Effexor, an anti-depressant and mood stabilizer. We've also tried different drugs in the past, SSRIs like Prozac, but I strongly believe talk therapy is the key. Medicine helps, but it's usually not enough. Especially not in chronic cases, like Brian's.

His session is up; we make a follow-up for two weeks because he is too busy next week to come in. I try to convince him that he can take an hour of his time out, but he refuses. I remind him to call 911 if he's feeling suicidal and that he can also call me.

At 11 a.m., I have an appointment with another longtime client of mine, Julia. I've been working with her for almost a year and a half now. She tried to kill herself two days after learning her husband died in a car accident. She was referred to me after she got out of the psychiatric hospital. She struggles every day with depression and though she has some "good" days, the "bad" days are what usually bring her into my office on a weekly basis.

She's not having a great day today, but has been feeling "slightly better" lately. We discuss her interpersonal relationships and I suggest – I generally try not to urge her, as it puts more pressure on her that makes her hide herself away from loved ones and in general, life enjoyment – that she call up some friends to go out to dinner or see a movie with her sister – simple things to get her out of her house. I feel she is becoming agoraphobic as she rarely leaves her home, unless she has to, like going to work or getting groceries. But she calls in sick to work more and more lately, so I also fear she may lose her job.

After a long day, I call Lillian on the way to pick up Alex from daycare. She says she is feeling better and wants to come with me to the Coopers' tomorrow. I don't

want her to if she still feels sick in the morning, but she insists. She wants to see what Megan is like with the both of us there and to also gauge as if the transition from doctor to doctor is working smoothly thus far. Kelly, especially, needs to see the transition in progress or she may never fully see me as the right doctor and caregiver for her daughter and may, in turn, look for a new one. However, Megan, according to Tom, who I spoke with earlier today to set up the session with Megan, told me that Megan has talked about me a few times since the last time I saw her so I'm not sure bringing Lillian back into her life is the best idea. But it'll be nice to have Lillian there, especially if I'm feeling overwhelmed at any point. Her strength inspires me.

The following afternoon, I pull up to the Coopers' and park next to Lillian's car; she waits for me so we can go in together. Tom had taken another half-day at work and brought Mollie to the park, likely get them both some time away from the ever-present chaos at home, so it is Megan, Kelly, Lillian and me at the house.

Since it's another sunny, warm day out, we sit by the pool and watch Megan swim for a bit. After her time in the pool, we remind Megan that she's going to be seeing less and less of Lillian because of her upcoming radiation treatments. Kelly asks her how she feels about that.

Megan ignores the question and stares at her feet as she sits wrapped in a towel by the pool. She picks at the towel and pieces of yellow fabric fly off as she picks. Lillian tells her again about the transition and Megan suddenly looks at me with a blank look on her face.

"Megan? Are you okay?" Lillian asks, as she leans towards her.

“She is not my doctor,” Megan says to the towel.

“I am,” I say to her. “Your new doctor. And I have a feeling we’re going to get along just great.”

“Nope.”

“You don’t want Dr. James to be your doctor, honey? Why not?” Kelly asks her.

“I just don’t!” Megan shouts. She starts scratching her hair furiously. Kelly tries to take her hands, but Megan jerks away. Then she smacks her mother viciously on the arm.

“Megan!” Her mother gasps, standing up. “Don’t hit me! Why did you hit me?” She rubs at her arm.

“She’s not my doctor!” Megan screams.

“Megan, calm down,” Lillian says calmly. I struggle to do the same. I’ve never seen Megan react this aggressively, though I’ve heard she often does.

Megan starts to cry as she continues to scream. She runs to the pool. Her mom grabs her by the arm before she can jump in.

“Get off me!” Megan screams at her. Her mother keeps her grasp firm. “Get off me!”

“Megan,” I say as I rise and quickly walk over to her and her mom. “I’m sorry; we didn’t mean to upset you.”

“But Tristen Marie says you aren’t my doctor. Why are you lying to me?” Megan yells at her mother. She’s stopped crying.

“No, honey, she’s not. She not your doctor yet,” Kelly says to her, emphasizing the word “yet” and smoothing down her daughter’s hair. “Don’t worry.” Megan flings her mother’s hand off her head.

“Tristen Marie says you’re my new mom,” Megan says to me. She pulls away from Kelly and drops to the ground. She curls into a ball on the concrete surrounding the pool.

The three of us freeze. Kelly looks horrified. I stare at the small child crying on the ground and I instantly want to comfort her. I know that this is her psychosis talking, but like every other situation and thought running through her head, I don’t know how it manifested. I’m pretty mortified. I’m also somewhat scared.

Lillian is the first to move. She sits down next to Megan and pulls her into her arms. Megan tries to struggle but Lillian holds on. Screams erupt from Megan’s mouth but Lillian doesn’t flinch. Kelly and I watch them silently, as we don’t dare to look at one another. Lillian strokes Megan’s hair and rocks her in her arms and Megan continues to sob. Lillian holds her tightly for what seems like hours. When Megan finally stops resisting, Lillian tries talking to her.

“Megan,” she says slowly, tilting Megan’s chin upwards, but Megan refuses to look at her and jerks her head away. “Relax. Please tell me why you think Lisa is your ‘new mother.’ You already have a wonderful mother who loves you very much.”

Megan says nothing. An awkward silence sweeps over us and Kelly chokes back a sob. I no longer want to be here; I feel like an intruder.

Megan eventually looks up. Her face is blank

“Well, Tristen Marie says she’s my mother.” She points at me.

I see Kelly move her head in my peripheral; she's looking at me. Megan and Lillian are, as well. I look straight at Megan.

"I'm not sure why Tristen Marie is telling you that, hon—Megan—but I'm just here because Lillian's sick and can no longer take care of you," I say.

"Why is Tristen Marie saying this?" Kelly asks Megan point blank. Her voice sounds hard but it also wavers slightly. Megan shrugs.

Lillian interrupts quickly. "All Megan needs to do right now is realize that despite what her hallucinations—that's what they are, Megan; Tristen Marie is not real—are saying, it's not true. Your mom is right there. She's always been your mom and she always will be."

"Tristen Marie is real!" Megan shouts at Lillian. "She's right next to me. I don't care if you can't see her. I hate you." She runs up to me and grabs onto my arm. I don't move.

Refusing to let this get any more out of control, I take hold of Megan's arms and gently pull her to my body. I hold them and lean down in front of her, which is precarious because it's a very comforting pose, but I need to make eye contact and I need her not to move. I watch her eyes as they connect to mine and her expression shifts from bewildered to dazed. I realize how deep her psychosis is at that moment.

"Megan. Megan." I say, trying to bring her back. I don't break my gaze with Megan, despite Kelly's wails and Lillian's comforting. "You don't need to be upset; it's a very confusing situation. I know that you know that the voices you hear aren't real and the visions you see are just in your head. But right now, so we can understand this

better, let's pretend Tristen Marie is there. Has Tristen Marie told you why she thinks you have a new mom?" I'm finally pleased with this way I'm handling her.

She still looks blank. I ask her again to focus.

Finally, her eyes shift again. She seems to have come back to reality.

"She just says that Mama is not my mama anymore. And that you're my mama. I believe her because she doesn't lie to me," she says, and then quickly spins away. I grab onto her arm to keep her from running.

"But why is she saying that, Megan?" I ask her, trying to get her to look at me again. I notice her eyes flick to her right. "What are you looking at, Megan?"

"No," Megan shakes her head. "No!"

"No, what?" I ask. I watch her, waiting for a response.

"Tristen Marie says that I should tell you I love you," Megan says finally, her voice small. She looks to her right again.

I'm taken aback but I'm able to control myself; I don't think Kelly or Lillian heard what she said which makes it easier for me to take charge of the situation.

"Why would she say that? Do you know why she thinks you need a new mom?"

"Yes," Megan whispers, her eyes still flicking around. Like with my experience with my other schizophrenia patients in the past, more than anything, I wish I could get inside her head and help her manage her thoughts. She looks like she's torn between what she thinks and what her hallucinations want her to say.

"Please tell me," I implore further.

"She says that I was taken away as a baby." As soon as the words come out, she squeezes out of my grasp and runs away from me, past her mother and Lillian, and

towards the door. Just before reaching the door, she trips over her feet and falls to the ground. She screams in pain and thrashes around violently.

“Get away from me! Get away!” She howls to no one. It’s an awful sight and I feel like I’m going to be sick. Kelly, Lillian, and I all run to her. Kelly leans down, grabs Megan, and pulls her into her arms. Megan struggles to break free but Kelly holds tightly. Kelly looks up at us as she efforts coaxing her daughter and asks us to leave. When neither Lillian nor I make a move, she becomes infuriated.

“Just leave,” Kelly says quietly, while still holding Megan. “Please just leave. Both of you.” Kelly was talking to us, but I wish she were talking to the Tristens.

Megan breaks free of Kelly’s hold and runs back into the house.

“I hope you all have a better night, Kelly. Let me know if you need anything,” Lillian says. She then looks at me, expectantly. I don’t know what to say so I tell Kelly that Megan will forget about this. She just met me and she’s excited. Big mistake.

“Go. Please,” Kelly says, staring at me.

Lillian gently tugs on my arm and snaps me back to reality. We walk back to our cars and I hear the Coopers’ door slam behind me.

“I need to get Alex in a few hours but I don’t know what I can do until then,” I say to Lillian. “I don’t want to go home.” I feel my pulse beating in my neck. I didn’t expect something like this to happen so soon, even though I know it’s nearly impossible to know what schizophrenics are going to do or say at any given moment. I hate the fact that my presence caused so much distress to everyone.

“Maybe some tea will relax you?” Lillian looks completely calm. “Do you want to come over?” she asks me. “I have Earl Grey, green tea, and chai.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll follow you there,” I say to her, grateful. Once in the comfort of my Acura, I reach into my purse for my pill vial. I pop a Klonopin in my mouth and swallow it with a sip of water from an old bottle lying on my passenger side seat. I turn on my iPod and look for Anna Nalick’s “2AM.” I keep the song on repeat the entire 38-minute drive to her house. Anna Nalick urges me to “just breathe.” I breathe. I pant. I drive too quickly. I lose Lillian. But Lillian finds me. She doesn’t need a song to remind her to breathe.

CHAPTER 4

“She may not even remember what she said or possibly even anything that happened today,” Lillian says, while getting Half and Half from her refrigerator. “And don’t worry about Kelly. She’ll get over it.”

I normally drink my tea with milk but I don’t ask if she has any. She gives me the cream and I pour it into my perfectly warm tea. I take a small sip and somehow that one sip is more comforting than anything she has said. At this point, watching her move about her kitchen, as I just sit there watching and sipping tea, I feel almost child-like, or maybe more like a student again, asking her for this much guidance, especially with her being sick. But then again, she does seem to want to talk it out and calm me down. And mental illness isn’t something that you just suddenly figure out or even ever fully comprehend. But Lillian still has that way, unintentionally of course, of making me feel younger than I am, more naïve and inexperienced, and not as good at my job as I know I can be. She just seems to have that inner strength that, especially lately, I seem to lack. And who am I to be the one lacking inner strength when she is the one dying of cancer?

When Lillian told me about her diagnosis and retirement—only nine days after she learned it is terminal—she seemed to do so with little emotion or trepidation. She told me while in her office where we often have lunch, even before I opened up my brown bag. It was as if she told me she was coming down with a bug and taking a few days off.

“Lisa,” she’d said, as I sat across from her at her desk, “I have colon cancer, it’s terminal and I’ve decided against chemotherapy.”

Before I could say anything, she’d continued.

“I’m retiring. I’ve been considering it even before I was diagnosed so now I’m starting the process immediately,” she said.

Breathlessly, I expressed that I was sorry at least three times, taking in the information and probably responding to it too quickly. I didn’t even know she had cancer. She had been taking more time off than I’d seen her to do before but she never let on, nor did she ever seem sick. Maybe I just wasn’t looking for it. But at the time, Lillian didn’t seem to want an apology and I guessed, especially when the words were spewing out of my mouth, that when someone you know (and, in my case, care deeply for) says that she has a terminal disease, apologizing doesn’t make sense. But I had no idea what else to say or do.

“Lisa, she said, as her eyes shifted away from mine, “I wish I didn’t have cancer. But I do. I just do.”

“Yeah,” I responded dumbly.

I sat there with her for a long minute.

“Can I do anything?” I asked her, my ears ringing.

“Well, we’ll talk about this later, but I’m going to do my best to assign all of my clients before I retire and I’m hoping you can take on a case or two,” she says, still looking away.

“Oh my God, yes, of course!” I said, eager to help in any way. “Yes. Assign me as many as you’d like.”

“Thanks, kiddo.”

I didn't cry until the next day, almost exactly 24 hours later. I'd popped my head into her office to see if she wanted lunch, but her head was down on her desk, buried in her arms. I quickly went back into my office, swallowed a Klonopin, and sobbed my way through half a bag of Fritos.

As I look at her now, across the table in the house she's lived in nearly as long as I've been alive, I decide it's time to push away my fears. I'm a capable doctor. Lillian is my friend. It's okay to ask for guidance. If Lillian can be so strong about everything that's happening with her, I shouldn't have a problem with this. I refuse to.

“You're right,” I say to her, as she sits down across from me. “I'm sure it'll blow over.”

“You can't worry too much about Megan's hallucinations, unless she gets violent,” Lillian says, blowing into her tea and taking a small sip. A piece of light grey hair falls across her face and she tucks it behind her ear.

“Why does she scratch at her face? Has she been doing that for awhile?” I ask, mimicking Lillian and blowing into my tea.

“We're not sure,” Lillian responds. “She told Tom once that they were itchy. We think that her lack of sleep might contribute to it.”

“Maybe it's like a tic,” I say. You've heard of that girl from Florida with schizophrenia... Hannah Klein is her name, I think? She constantly rubs her hands against her cheeks. They call it self-stemming, right?”

“Yeah,” Lillian says. “Interesting. Never really thought about it that way. But Megan's tic, as you say, is clearly more violent.”

“Yeah, I remember reading that Hannah Klein’s parents said she only does it when she’s excited or happy.” My mug warms my hands.

“How old is she again?” Lillian asks.

“Mmm, 11 or 12 now, I think,” I say. “She was on the Dr. Phil show recently.”

“Right, right.” Lillian takes another sip of her tea and leans back into her chair. She winces slightly.

“How have you been feeling, Lil?” I ask, concerned.

“Oh, fine. Just a little back pain,” she says casually. “Nothing to complain about.”

I want to know more about her health but she excuses herself to go to the bathroom before I can ask.

I look around her kitchen. Her house, itself, is old, but she clearly renovated her kitchen in the recent past. Her hardwood floors are smooth and seemingly blemish-free and her black marble countertops look spotless. I stand and walk to her refrigerator. There’s a picture of a red-haired bride, whom I recognize as Lillian’s daughter, Jackie. She’s standing next to a smiling Lillian, who’s wearing a dark green dress with big, poufy sleeves, clearly from the 80s. There are also pictures of her grandchildren—infant pictures, school pictures, soccer pictures. Magnets hold up the pictures. There’s one that says, “My Heart belongs to my GRANDKIDS!” and there’s one of Rosie the Riveter exclaiming, “We Can Do It!” I chuckle when I notice one of an older woman at the doctor’s office that states, “Many Women fear the word ‘menopause’ as I prefer to call it Puberty Part II.” Lillian comes out of the bathroom and joins me at the refrigerator.

“Jackie looks beautiful,” I say to her, pointing at the wedding picture.

“Yep,” she responds. “That’s my oldest daughter, Jackie.”

“She’s beautiful,” I say.

“She is,” Lillian says. I notice her voice crack slightly. I feel guilty. I didn’t mean to upset her; the last thing I wanted was to come into her home and do so.

“Thank you so much for the tea and advice, Lillian. I’m gonna take off. Unless you want company?”

“I’m going to take a bath,” Lillian responds. “But feel free to come over anytime. I like the company.”

“Definitely,” I say, as we walk towards her front door. “You have a lovely home.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Call me if you need me. You’ll be just fine.”

As I head to pick up Alex, I feel reenergized. Though it was tough to see Lillian break slightly, she made me feel so much better about working with Megan.

I call the Coopers’ house the next evening after Alex goes to bed. I wanted to call sooner, but Lillian and I thought it was best to give the Coopers some time before doing so. They could always call me if they needed to; I just didn’t need to put more pressure on the situation so immediately. After dinner and before I put Alex to bed, I hung out with him in his room. He told me about the clay bunny he made in daycare and sang to me his new favorite song – a Justin Beiber song. I was not thrilled about that until I later looked up the lyrics and they were innocent enough. It was so nice to hear how happy my son is. So carefree. How a child should be.

Kelly picks up the phone.

“Hi, Kelly. It’s Lisa James,” I say, with just enough enthusiasm.

“Oh. Hi.”

“I just wanted to check in with you guys,” I say, ignoring her irritated tone.

“How’s Megan doing?”

“Fine.”

“Okay,” I say. “Good.”

There’s no voice on the other line.

“Is everything okay, Kelly?” I ask, confused.

“Yep.”

“Okay. Good,” I say again. “Um, do you mind if I talk to Tom for a minute?”

“Sure.” She drops the phone.

After a minute, Tom picks up. “Hey Lisa.” It was nice to hear a friendly voice.

“Hey, Tom. How’s it going over there?”

“Oh, fine. We just had dinner. Mollie’s already asleep.”

“That’s great. Do you and Kelly get to kick back a bit?” I ask.

“Oh, Megan is bouncing off the walls, as usual. There’s no kicking back around here,” Tom responds with a slight laugh. But it doesn’t sound like he thinks it’s funny.

“How’s her sleep? Does she at least go to bed around a consistent time?” I ask.

“We try to settle her down around 8 – read to her in bed, or she reads to us. But it takes her quite some time to go to sleep. And she gets about 5 hours a night. We don’t get much sleep either.” He chuckles again. I hear him yawn.

“Well, I’ll let you go. Just wanted to see when you’d like me to come over next?” I ask. “I’ll be in the office from nine until three for the rest of the week but I can

come over afterwards or you guys can come by the office. You generally work until five, five-thirty, right?”

“Yep, but Kelly likes to run her errands late in the afternoon so you can come earlier. I’ll talk to Kelly and get back to you. I think we’re good for the week. How about next Monday?”

“Okay, sounds good,” I say. “Please remind Kelly that can call me whenever, too.”

Tom is quiet for a moment. “Yeah, I’ll talk to her.”

“Sounds good,” I repeat awkwardly. Why the pause? “Have a good rest of the night. I hope you all get some sleep.”

“Thanks, Lisa. Take care.”

I hang up and get ready for bed, suddenly feeling exhausted. Kelly definitely seemed annoyed. The whole “new mom” thing must still be bothering her, and that concerns me a bit because I don’t know if Megan has brought it up again since I left. I assume Tom would have mentioned it, but maybe not. I guess I can only wait until Monday to see.

CHAPTER 5

It's Monday morning and even though Kevin is supposed to have custody of Alex this week, he called me yesterday to ask if I'm able to keep Alex for a few more days because he and Trina both caught the flu and they don't want Alex to get it, too.

I drive Alex to preschool and since I'm only seeing the Coopers' today, later this afternoon, I have the morning off. I sit on my living room couch, eat donuts, and try to focus on the late morning game shows, *Let's Make a Deal* and *The Price is Right*. I arrive at the Coopers' just before 2 p.m., allowing myself to have plenty of time with Megan until I have to pick up Alex. I have to admit that I'm slightly unnerved by the fact that Tom won't be here, as he works as a physical therapist until 4:30 and gets home at 5, but it's Megan whom I should be concerned about so I focus my attention on her.

Kelly's frosty demeanor, since the last time I spoke with her—Wednesday on the phone—seems to have changed.

"Come on in, Lisa," she says in a pleasant tone.

"Thanks, Kelly," I respond as we walk through the hallway and into the kitchen.

"Do you want something to drink?" Kelly asks, already opening the refrigerator and looking at me expectantly.

"Sure, water would be great, thanks."

She hands me a bottled water and starts walking towards the stairs. I follow her silently, until we reach Megan's room. Megan is lying on her stomach across the floor, her legs taking turns kicking upwards. She doesn't even look up as we come in.

"Megan, honey, Dr. James is here," Kelly says, kneeling down.

I really wish she'd just call me Lisa.

Megan doesn't look up.

"Hi Megan," I say to her, sitting down next to her.

"Hi," she responds, as she continues coloring in a coloring book about animals. She's scribbled bright yellow streaks across a picture of a cat but perfectly colored a pig – pink and completely within the lines.

"Wow, you did a great job coloring that pig, Megan!"

"His name is Phil," she says, continuing to scribble across the cat. "I have a pig named Elton John."

I fight the urge to laugh at that.

"Oh yeah, where is he? Is he on another page?" I ask Megan.

"No. He's not in the book."

"Oh, where is he?" I glance at Kelly, who's standing now, watching us. She's expressionless.

"In the backyard, probably. Don't know," she answers.

"Megan, we don't have a pig," Kelly interjects.

"He's just my friend," Megan says, leaning back to inspect her work. "Only I can see him."

"That's right," Kelly says. "He's just—"

Megan cuts her off. “I named him Elton John after the singer,” she tells me loudly, finally looking at me. She brushes her hair off her face.

“Do you like any Elton John songs?” I ask her, trying to steer her back into reality.

“Um,” she says, standing. She rushes to her bed and hops onto it. ““Can You Feel The Love Tonight.”” She bounces up and down on her behind.

“That’s from *The Lion King*, right?” I ask her.

“Yup!” She jumps off the bed and sits down next to me. “That’s my favorite Disney movie. And *Finding Nemo*.”

“I love those movies,” I tell her.

“What’s your favorite?” she asks me.

“Disney movie? Hmm, I like a lot of them. I think *The Little Mermaid* is my favorite but I like *Beauty and The Beast* and *The Lion King*, too.”

“Oh, yeah. I know them,” she says nonchalantly.

Kelly interrupts us. “I’m going to check on Mollie. She’s sleeping,” she tells me. I nod. “Have fun, Megan,” she says to her daughter.

I’m frustrated because I feel like I was in the middle of a solid conversation with Megan, trying to bring her back into lucidity, and I do not want to lose her attention.

But Megan continues on, ignoring her mother. Kelly leaves the room.

“Who’s your favorite Disney princess?” Megan asks me. Before I can answer, she tells me her favorite is Cinderella.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because she has blond hair like me.”

I laugh a little. Such a typical 6-year-old answer for such an atypical little girl.

“Yes, she does,” I say. “It’s pretty.”

“It’s like yours, too,” she says, touching the end of a piece of my hair.

“Yeah! But I like Belle the most,” I say to her, as she continues to gently pull at my hair, staring at it intently. “You know why?” I ask her.

“No.”

“Because she doesn’t care about how the Beast looks; she loves him for who he is.”

Megan doesn’t say anything.

“She gets to know him and falls in love with him and then he turns into a prince,” I continue.

Megan’s seemingly lost interest in the conversation and runs over to her bookshelf. She comes back to me, book in hand. It’s *Beauty and the Beast*.

“I can read this,” she says to me.

“Do you want to read it to me?” I ask.

“Here, look.” She gives the book to me. “It’s 96 pages. And lots of big words. And French.”

I slowly flip through it. It’s the original Disney version—96 pages just as she said, containing French names like Monsieur D’Arque and words like candelabra.

“Who’s your favorite character?” I ask her, as I continue looking through the book.

“Lumiere,” she says in a flawless French accent. “He’s the candlestick.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s great,” I say to her. She slaps her palms on her legs excitedly.

“Read me your favorite chapter,” I say to her.

She grabs the book and quickly reads me the chapter when the Beast “gives” Belle his library. She never falters on a word or phrase.

I’m in awe. This girl is truly special.

“What do you want to do next?” she asks me expectantly.

“Up to you, Megan.” I could have sat her with her reading to me for an hour longer.

“I don’t really like dolls,” she says, kneeling over her toy chest. “Let’s play Monopoly.”

“We played Monopoly last time I was here, remember?”

“Oh,” she says. She pauses and her eyes start to glaze over.

“Let’s play again,” I say, not wanting to lose her concentration.

“No,” she says, running out of the room.

“Megan,” I call, following her. “Where are you going?”

She doesn’t respond as she runs down the stairs.

I continue to follow her, looking for Kelly in the process. She’s nowhere to be found.

Megan is standing in front of the slider, leading to the backyard.

“Open it,” she says, looking out, palms pressed on the glass. “I wanna go swimming.”

The slider is locked from the inside. I couldn’t open it without a key.

“But you don’t have your bathing suit on,” I say.

“I’ll get it!” She’s already running to the stairs.

“No, no, Megan!” I call, again running after her. “Let’s um, have a snack instead.”

She stops before the stairs. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. What’s your favorite?” I ask, once again looking around for Kelly.

“Oreos. Only the cream, though.”

“Okay, sounds good,” I say. “But let’s find your mom first.”

She scratches at her eyes. “I’m hungry!”

“Okay, are they in the pantry?” I ask her, grabbing her hand.

“No, above the fridge,” she says, leading me into the kitchen. “No treats in there,” she says about the pantry. She hoists herself up on a bar stool at the counter.

I find the Oreos and give her two. She yells for three. I give her three. She quickly pulls all three apart, furiously licking at the cream inside, disregarding the cookie part.

“Can I have those?” I ask her.

“Yeah,” she says, sliding the plate towards me. “What now?” She bounces up and down in her seat.

“Want to read me more of your book?” I need to get her mind off the idea of swimming.

“No,” she says. “What else?”

“Um,” I say. I’m grateful to see Kelly come down the stairs, holding Mollie.

“I nodded off checking on Mollie,” Kelly says, lightly stroking the top of Megan’s head. Megan shrugs her off and scratches at her eyes. I watch as she stares at something the kitchen table.

“Can we have more Oreos?” Megan asks, not looking away from the table.

Kelly looks at me.

“I’m not hungry, anymore, Megan. And it’s probably not good to eat anymore so close to dinner,” I say. Megan continues to stare at the table. She pauses.

“Not for you,” she replies. Was she talking about giving Oreos to her hallucinations? A Tristen? More than one? I’m staring at the chairs at the kitchen table now – are the Tristens sitting there? Are they just sitting? Are they talking to Megan?

“Um, so Megan read me some *Beauty and the Beast*,” I told Kelly. “Isn’t that right, Megan?”

“That’s great,” Kelly says, heating up a bottle of milk on the stove for Mollie. Her back is turned to Megan and me.

Megan walks to the kitchen table. She circles the table and eventually sits at the head. She scratches at her eyes, looking at a chair next to her. She’s gone. It happened so quickly.

“What are you doing over there, Megan?” I ask her, walking over.

Megan frowns, looking down at the table. “Nothing,” she says, quietly. I’ve never seen her like this. “I wanna go to bed, Mom,” she says, still looking down.

“You can take a 20-minute nap,” Kelly says, turning and looking at her.

Megan gets up slowly, stands still for a moment, and then heads to the stairs.

“I’ll be up in a minute, sweetie,” Kelly calls to her. “Say goodbye to Dr. James.”

Megan's already out of sight.

"You can take off, Lisa," Kelly says. "Sounds like a good day. How many Oreos did you give her?"

"She ate the cream out of three," I say, smiling.

Kelly smiles back.

"Are you sure you don't want more time to, you know, rest? I can watch Megan," I ask her.

"No, no, thanks," she says, hoisting up Mollie higher on her shoulder. That baby is so quiet. She sucks on her pacifier, looking over Kelly's shoulder at the floor.

"You're not a babysitter," Kelly says. "I've got it."

At first, I'm slightly taken aback by that babysitter remark, probably because I thought I detected a hint of snide in her tone. But she's right; I'm not Megan's babysitter. But I'm working with the Coopers not just for Megan, but also to give Tom and Kelly some time without having to worry about their sick daughter alone, even it's just for a few hours a few days a week. Give them a break. In a way, I am part-babysitter. When I'm with Megan, it's certainly part of my responsibility to simply watch her and make sure she doesn't hurt herself or anyone else.

"All right," I say. At least I'll have a little bit of time to myself before I need to pick up Alex. "I can come over again tomorrow if you need to run errands or get out of the house. I only have a few other appointments in the morning."

"You know what? That'd be great, thanks," Kelly says.

"Same time?" I ask.

“Can you come at one, instead of two?” She asks me. “I would love to run to the mall briefly to get a birthday present for a friend and I gotta get groceries, too.”

I don’t mind at all. This is the first time she’s asked me to do anything.

“No, that’s fine. Absolutely fine,” I say, as Kelly leads me to the front door. “I feel like Megan and I made some great progress today.” I smile at her, excitement in my voice.

Kelly purses her lips a bit as she opens the door. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

Why does she sound suspicious? Why wouldn’t she be excited to hear that?

“Well, the book. And just in general. She remained lucid nearly the entire time I was with her.”

“Oh. Okay, good. That’s good,” Kelly says, smiling. “Thanks a lot, Lisa. Have a good one.”

“You too.” I smile back at her and she shuts the door behind me. The lock clicks a moment later.

At 7:45 p.m. that night, fifteen minutes before Alex’s bedtime, I push him to read to me.

“I hate reading,” he says, standing at the foot of his bed.

“What? No you don’t! Since when?” I sit atop his *Transformers* comforter.

“I don’t know. Since forever,” he says, shrugging.

“Put on your PJs,” I say to him. He pulls his *Transformers* pajamas out from underneath his pillow and pulls off his jeans and tee shirt. The kid loves *Transformers* – the original cartoon, not the movie. He’s too young for anything Megan Fox-related. I

gave him the entire series box set last year on his birthday. He's must have watched the whole thing at least three times since.

"You don't hate reading," I said to him again, as he got into bed and under the covers.

"Yeah, I do, Mom," he says. "It's my least favorite subject."

"Aw, honey," I say, scooting towards him. "Reading is fun. And it makes you smart."

"So does math," he responds, putting his arms behind his head against his pillow.

"True," I say, laughing. "But we're not about to do any adding right now, honey."

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven..." He rattles numbers off until twenty. "Twenty!" He exclaims proudly.

"You are so smart, baby," I say, lying down next to him. "Ms. Jessie must be proud of her star student," I say, referring to his pre-school teacher. "I'm so proud of you, too."

Alex smiles and picks at his thumb.

"Can I at least read to you for a bit?" I ask him.

"Okay," he says, still smiling.

I lean over and pull out his favorite "Clifford The Big Red Dog" book, *Clifford Visits the Hospital*. He always likes to look at the cover picture of Clifford with a stethoscope before I start reading. Once, he told me that he wants to be a doctor. But he's also told me he wants to be a garbage man, too. Or a truck driver.

After we finish, I kiss him goodnight. “Love you, Pookie Wookie,” I say.

“Love you, too, Pookie Wookie,” he responds, sliding deeper under the covers.

I turn on his nightlight and leave the door slightly ajar.

Once downstairs, I pour myself a glass of Merlot. I’m exhausted. I don’t even want the drink after I pour it; I just want to sleep. But I drink it anyway, while watching a re-run of *Jeopardy!* My favorite player of all-time is on it; that’s why I DVR’d it. He’s so unbelievably confident and brave. During the finals, he risked all his money during his Daily Doubles – the first time, nine thousand and the second, eighteen thousand. (They were back-to-back answers.) As he waited to respond, he kept a poker face on until he smiled broadly with his answers, “Anne Bronte” and “Suriname,” respectively. Who the hell knows that Sranan Tongo is the official language of Suriname? Well, Roger Craig does, I guess. I love how he clearly searched out the Daily Doubles to blow the competition away early. I’ve always been competitive. I’ve always fantasized about being a contestant on *Jeopardy!*, but I’ve never thought about trying out. I don’t really know why that is.

I rewind his back-to-back Daily Doubles a few times and then started to fall asleep. Soon, I was asleep on the couch, and stayed there the entire night, not waking up once.

CHAPTER 6

I spend the next morning in client sessions. Each appointment is forty-five minutes long, but they often go a bit late, as you can't just stop the appointment if the client is deep in the middle of something, which he or she often is.

Lillian has been out of the office since Friday, not feeling well, so I decide to go out to lunch before I head to the Coopers'. A colleague of mine, Jessica, passes me on the way out of the office.

"Oh hey, Lisa!" she says and we stop. There are clients in the room, waiting for their therapist or doctor to take them in. Some of them look up at us while others don't seem to notice we're there.

"Hey, Jessica. Good to see you," I say. "I'm heading out to lunch. Have a good one!"

"Oh, I thought you were going to that little girl's house again," Jessica says, following me out the door.

We're not supposed to talk about clients and Jessica knows that. We all do. But curiosity sometimes seems to take over. Clearly, I can understand wanting to talk to others about clients, but I know Jessica is about to ask me specifics. She wants to know about Megan Cooper. And she knows that's not her right.

"Heading to Panera, I think," I say, trying to avoid even mentioning Megan.

"Aw, wish I could join you," Jessica says. "But I just ate. Gotta get back in there," she says begrudgingly and nods towards the door to the reception area.

“Next time, maybe? See you later!” I say.

“Yep.” She heads back into the office.

She’s a little older than I am, in her late 30s and she’s never really been all that friendly towards me. But I’ve heard that from others, too. Once, when I was alone in my office, scheduling her appointments, she popped her head in and looked around my office.

“Hi,” I’d said to her. She didn’t respond, didn’t even look at me. She left without a word. Psychologists can be a bit odd. Maybe it’s because we’ve spent so many years of our lives holed up, doing research. Or maybe it’s because we work so much with patients with serious mental illnesses that we start to forget how to talk to those who aren’t our patients.

At Panera, I order the soup and salad combo: a cup of broccoli and cheddar soup and half of a Caesar salad – my favorites. As I eat, I pull out the last book of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Total guilty pleasure.

I read a few pages and set it down; I’m just not into it today. I feel a bit anxious to see Megan, but not in a bad way. I’m excited to be with her completely alone, without having to worry about Kelly or Tom or even Lillian. All I have to do is my job.

A few hours later, out at the pool with Megan, I’ve come to realize just how great this job could be. I get to help Megan in any way that I can, but I also get to sit out in the sun, feet in the pool, on this beautiful early-June afternoon. Unfortunately, I don’t have a bathing suit with me; I would love to splash around in the clear, light blue water

with Megan right now. It's currently in the mid-70s with a light wind – absolutely perfect. I've really enjoyed my afternoon with Megan so far.

Kelly was in a good mood again when I'd arrived. She'd made me a cup of coffee and we sat down in the living room to talk for a bit, while Megan sat on the floor, near her sister's playpen, talking quietly to Mollie. I tried to listen to what Megan was saying, since it seemed as if she was often responding; I caught her shaking her head and saying "no" more than once. Mollie doesn't talk so I'm not sure if she was whom Megan was talking to...

Kelly told me a little bit about her and her relationship with Tom. They met through Kelly's brother, they had their honeymoon in Bora Bora, and they wanted to wait at least two years after marriage before trying to get pregnant but that didn't happen. Kelly fascinates me; she talks so quickly and she's truly beautiful to look at. She has long, dark brown hair, straight, white teeth (I suspect Veneers; those suckers are perfect), and is wearing a gorgeous blue Missoni dress today. I felt frumpy sitting next to her.

Because of Alex's daycare situation, Kelly knows that I'm divorced and have a son, so she avoided asking me about Kevin – even though she didn't have to – and, instead, asked if I was seeing someone. I'd almost laughed at that.

Instead, I politely responded, "No, not seeing anyone right now. Just enjoying time with my son and, of course, there's work."

"Yeah, that must take up a lot of time, huh?" She asked, looking over at Megan and Mollie. "Lillian says you're working with fewer people now so you can come be with Megan?"

“Yeah,” I said. “I know how much time Lillian devoted to being here with her.”

“Were you upset that you had to lose some other clients?” Kelly asked me, taking a hair band from around her wrist and pulling her hair into a ponytail with it. I didn’t really mind Kelly’s directness but it was a bit unnerving.

“No, not at all,” I responded with a smile. I took a sip of my coffee.

“So, you’re pretty young, aren’t you?” Kelly asked.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. She was jumping all over the place with her questions.

“I just mean, to be a psychologist,” she went on.

“Oh yeah. I mean no, not really,” I’d said, relieved.

“Well, Lillian only has great things to say about you,” Kelly said, standing up. “You’re the big star at YBMH.”

I didn’t know what else to do, so I stood up next to her, holding my coffee.

“What do you mean, a big star?” I asked, laughing.

Kelly didn’t laugh.

“Well, Lillian said she only considered you to take care of Megan. That you have worked in schools before and all that,” she responded. “Are you done with your coffee?” She’d already picked it up from the coffee table.

“That’s nice of Lillian to say,” I called from the living room as she brought my cup into the kitchen. “I was more than happy to work with you all.”

“Alrighty, then,” Kelly said. She left for the mall with Mollie a few minutes later. “Have fun, sweetie,” she’d said to Megan before she left. “I’ll be home in a little bit. Be good.”

“K, bye,” Megan replied. Once Kelly and Mollie left, Megan was already on her way up the stairs to put on her bathing suit. Luckily, I’d asked Kelly before she left if Megan could go swimming, and if so, how to open the backdoor slider to get out to the pool. She’d given me a key to the slider, another one to get through the closed patio, and another to open the gate to the pool. I would have been surprised if Kelly said Megan wasn’t allowed to swim with just me there, since Lillian told me that she spent a lot of time with Megan in the pool.

Megan jumps right into the pool as soon as we get there. I sit near her on a patio chair. I look down at her, in her pink gingham two-piece, trying to jump onto a floating tube.

“You need to get your body at least somewhat on it before you can jump on,” I call to her.

“Oh.” She climbs on top of the tube with ease. “Why aren’t you swimming?” She’s asked me this twice now.

“I don’t have a bathing suit, remember?” I say. “I don’t mind watching you! The water’s pretty warm, huh?”

“Ya,” she answers, leaning down over her tube and splashing her arms into it.

“So, use one of hers.”

“Use one of whose, Megan?” I say, leaning back and closing my eyes.

“Hers. That lady’s.”

“What?” I sit upright. “You mean... your mom’s?”

“Yeah.” Megan kicks her way across the pool in her tube.

“No, that’s okay,” I say, standing up and following her to the other end. “Don’t go into the deep end, Megan.”

“Dad lets me if he’s out here,” she replies, still kicking.

“Okay,” I say. “But he’s probably in the pool with you then, right?”

She doesn’t respond.

“Megan, please!” I say, my voice rising. “Please just swim back into the shallow end.”

No response.

“You don’t want me to tell your mom that you aren’t listening to me, do you?” I ask her, starting to worry that I’m going to have to jump into the pool after her.

“How can you tell yourself?” Megan responds, laughing hysterically.

“What? What do you mean?” I ask, exasperated.

Megan continues to laugh and kicks around in a circle.

“Megan, please stop and come out of the pool,” I say, as close to her as I can be.

“You can read to me or we can have a snack?”

“No! I’m not done yet!” Megan yells.

“Stop yelling, Megan. Please just come out.”

“No!” Megan yells again, but she starts heading back to the shallow end.

I’m suddenly incredibly irritated that the Coopers have a deep-end pool when they have a mentally ill 6-year-old and a baby, despite all the security they’ve set up. I crack my neck and take a deep breath.

“A few more minutes, okay,” I say to her, trying to steady my heartbeat by taking a few deep breaths.

“Okay, fine,” Megan says, sullenly. She jumps out of the tube and dunks her head under the water. “Look at that! Did you see what I did?” She asks me once she comes up for air.

“Yes, good job.” I grab her towel off a lawn chair.

Megan climbs out of the pool and runs over to me. I wrap the towel around her.

“Let’s go play inside!” She says, running towards the house.

“Megan! Don’t run! Your feet are wet!” I’m running now.

I stop her at the patio. “Don’t forget that you need to use the shower before you go in,” I say.

“Oh, yeah.” She runs towards the Coopers’ outdoor shower next to a shed.

“No running!”

After we shower the chlorine off of her, I read a chapter of *Beauty and the Beast* to her, as we sit on her bed. She asks me to read the exact same chapter that she read yesterday and gets upset when I ask if she wants to hear another one instead. So I read the library chapter. Or, really, I hold the book and read every other word. She keeps jumping in and reading over me. Sometimes, she looks up at me and smiles proudly after reading.

“Can we eat lunch?” She asks me, jumping off the bed after we finish.

“I thought you already ate before I got here?”

“Yup,” she says, grabbing my hand and tries to pull me off the bed. I stand.

“Then why would you ask me that?” I ask her, following her out of her bedroom.

“Tristen Elizabeth and Tristen Marie are hungry and we want you to cook mac n cheese for us,” she says, looking up at me. “Please.”

“I’ll make a little bit of macaroni for you, Megan,” I say, as we walk down the stairs. “But not that much. Because you already ate and I don’t want you to spoil your dinner.” It’s best not to mention the Tristens; I have to do my best not to feed into her hallucinations.

The Coopers have individual-sized cups of macaroni and cheese so I pop one into the microwave.

“We can share one,” I say to her.

“You can share with Tristen Elizabeth. Tristen Marie and I want to split our own.”

“Go sit at the table, Megan,” I say. “What do you want to drink?”

She’s silent for a minute at the table. “Milk for me and Tristen Marie. Tristen Elizabeth just went up to my room.”

“Why are they all named Tristen, Megan?” I ask her.

“I don’t know,” she replies, smiling. “They just are.”

“But you came up with that name, didn’t you?”

“No!” She yells, standing. “They were born with that name.”

“Okay,” I say, pacifying her. “Just sit down and wait for your macaroni.” I hand her a small cup of milk. She takes it and puts it in front of the seat next to her.

The microwave goes off. I pour the cheese mix into the macaroni and stir it.

“When did you start to hallucinate them, Megan?”

“Stop,” Megan says, quietly.

“Stop what?” I ask, bringing the macaroni over to her. I sit down in the seat in front of where Megan placed the glass of milk.

“You just sat on Tristen Marie!” Megan screams and hits me in the face. In shock, I drop the macaroni on the table and it starts to pour out of the plastic container.

“Megan!” I stand, grabbing a fistful of napkins from the counter. “Don’t hit me! That hurts!”

“You just SAT on Tristen Marie!” She repeats and crosses her arms.

“Don’t hit me! Don’t hit anyone,” I say, trying to wipe up the macaroni with one hand as I stroke the spot where she hit me on my cheek with the other. It doesn’t hurt, but I rub at it unconsciously, a knee-jerk reaction.

“I wouldn’t, if you didn’t sit on her,” Megan says, calmly. “Now you need to make new macaroni.”

“Megan, please say you’re sorry.” I stop cleaning and lean down to look at her closely.

“I’m sorry.” She says, shrugging. “But that’s what happens if Tristen Marie gets mad. I hit.”

“She told you to hit me?” I ask. Crap.

“Yes, she’s one of the bad ones. Remember?” Megan looks at the mess in my hands. “Want me to help you clean?”

“Um, yeah. Yes, please do,” I say. “Grab some napkins.”

We clean the table off and Megan heads to the living room.

“Wash your hands,” I tell her.

She comes back and I lift her so she can wash her hands in the kitchen sink.

When I set her down, she runs back into the living room.

I wash my hands then slowly walk go into the living room after her. Megan's in Mollie's playpen. She giggles.

"I'm Mollie. I'm a baby," she says, putting a pacifier in her mouth.

"Megan, take that out," I say, coming towards her. She throws it at me.

"Don't throw, Megan." I say. I've got a headache.

I wash the pacifier off and sit down on the couch. "What's your favorite TV show?" I ask her, grabbing the remote and turning on PBS.

"I'm not allowed to watch TV until right before bed," she tells me, still in the playpen.

"Oh. Okay." I shut the TV off.

"I can watch a movie, though, if I've been good."

"Do you think you've been good?" I ask her.

"Yes," she says. "But I know you're going to say no 'cuz I hit you. But that was really Tristen Marie. And I said I was sorry." She jumps out of the playpen and stands directly in front of me.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

All I can do is talk to her like I would with any other schizophrenic.

"I'm Lisa, Megan. Your doctor. Your mama went out shopping with your sister, Mollie, and will be home soon," I say to her, as she looks back towards the kitchen. I want to grab her hands to get her to look at me again but decide against it.

"Did you hear me, Megan?"

“No,” she responds quietly and runs towards the stairs. I hear her feet slam against each step.

I stay seated. I tell myself it’s not a big deal. She’s a child. She’s a schizophrenic child. She’s confused but I just need to work it out. I grab a bottled water from the fridge and meet Megan in her bedroom. She’s lying on her stomach on the floor, reading *Beauty and the Beast*.

“Megan,” I say, sitting next to her. “Please stop running away from me.”

She ignores me and stares at a picture of Belle in her yellow gown.

“Please look at me, Megan,” I ask her, taking the book from her. I expect her to yell or hit me but she doesn’t. She just turns around, flops on her back and stares up at the ceiling.

“Megan?”

She closes her eyes for a second and opens them. “I have a headache,” she says to the air.

“I’ll get you some medicine, sweetie,” I say to her. I feel so bad for her; I can’t imagine what it’s like to be in her head.

She’s quickly rises to her feet. “I just take Children’s Tylenol.”

“Okay, let’s get some,” I say. “But you need to stop running around so much. You’re wearing yourself out. Probably why you have a headache.”

She takes my hand. “Okay, Mama.”

“It’s Lisa,” I say. “Lisa.”

“Lisa,” she repeats. Her voice is flat.

After she's taken her Tylenol and eats a few slices of orange, we go back up to her room and color a pair of skunks together. She waits until I'm done with the black crayon and then uses it, and does the same with the white after I'm done.

"What's her name?" She asks me, pointing towards my skunk.

"Um," I say. "Louise."

She laughs. "Louise, the skunk."

"How about yours?" I ask her.

She thinks for a minute, tilting her head to the side, hand on her chin. She's so cute.

"I don't know," she finally says. "You name her."

"Laura," I say. "Laura and Louisa."

"Okay!" She says, clapping her hands together once.

We start to color a pair of birds next when I hear the garage door open. "Sounds like your mom and sister are home!" I say to Megan.

"I'm tired," Megan responds, scratching at her eyes.

"Don't scratch your eyes like that, Megan," I say, taking her hands off her face.

For once, she doesn't struggle.

"Let's go say hi to them!" I say. Megan stands but climbs into her bed instead.

"What are you doing?" I ask her.

"Megan? Lisa? Where are you guys?" Kelly calls from the foot of the stairs.

I look at Megan. She's silent, her head on her pillow.

"We're up here!" I shout back to Kelly. "In Megan's bedroom. Be right down!"

Megan looks up at me. "Are you leaving?" She asks.

“Not yet, but soon,” I tell her. “But now your mom and Mollie are home, so you can play with them.”

“No, thanks,” she says, as her eyes shift upwards towards the ceiling.

“What? Why not?” I ask her. “Does your head still hurt?”

No response.

I can hear Kelly coming up the stairs. She goes into Mollie’s room before coming into Megan’s.

Megan still hasn’t moved.

“Hey, guys,” Kelly says. She doesn’t look surprised to see Megan in bed. “You all right, sweetie?” She asks Megan. I stand up and switch places with Kelly.

Megan doesn’t answer so I tell Kelly that she has a headache.

“You were running around too much, weren’t you?” Kelly says, kissing her on the forehead. Megan still doesn’t respond and continues looking at the ceiling. She’s catatonic. Kelly looks up at me.

“We were coloring right before you guys came home. Just before that, she said she had a headache so I gave her a Tylenol and she ate a few orange slices,” I say to her.

“Did you guys go swimming?” Kelly asks Megan and gets no response in return.

“She’s catatonic,” Kelly says to me. “When did this start?”

“She climbed into bed only a few minutes ago and has been extremely hyperactive, manic even, all day before this,” I say. “We swam, read... did all sorts of things.”

“Why is she like this?” Kelly asks, concerned. I sit down at the foot of Megan’s bed.

“Megan,” I say to her, patting the blanket on top of one of her legs. “Look at me. Talk to me.”

It takes a few seconds but finally, her eyes drop and she looks at me.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, “You went away for a bit.”

She blinks at me and then looks at Kelly.

“I’m fine,” she says. She sits up quickly. “Can we finish coloring?”

Kelly lets out a small laugh, relieved. “Lisa has to go but I will color with you.”

Megan makes a small face but climbs over her and picks out a yellow crayon.

I’m concerned. But Kelly is already leading me out of the room.

“Say goodbye to Lisa,” Kelly tells Megan.

Megan looks up at me and smiles. “Bye!”

I watch Megan happily start to color the bird’s head. “Bye, Megan!” I say. “I had fun today. I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay,” she says. “See ya soon.”

“It’s almost 3:30,” Kelly says, as I grab my purse off the counter. “Thanks for the extra time. How did today go? I got a bit worried there.” She walks me towards the front door.

My mind is racing. I don’t know if I should mention the “Mama” thing. At least not directly. Megan was hallucinating, just like she was with the Tristens. I’m more concerned with how quickly she fell into a catatonic state and back out of it.

“It was a good day, overall,” I say, calmly, thinking of Lillian. “But she had some violent moments and I’ve gotta say that I’m a bit concerned that she went

catatonic, though I know that's been happening a lot lately. Which is probably because of the recent dosage changes with her medicines, especially the Thorazine."

"Will that go away? The quick shifts from the mania to the catatonia?" Kelly asks. She wrings her wrists.

"As she settles down into the new dosage Lillian had prescribed to her, she should even out a bit more," I say. "Though I've seen her mania much more; this is the first time I've seen her in a catatonic state. She spent much of the day hallucinating. Tristen Marie told her to hit me."

Kelly sighs. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," I say. "Has Tristen Marie or the other Tristens been around a lot lately?"

"Yes," Kelly says, but Tom and I've noticed that she's been hallucinating less in the past few weeks..."

I wonder if she trailed off because she just realized that I've come along in the past few weeks.

"Well, I'm going to go check on her. Hopefully Mollie fell asleep," Kelly glances at the stairs.

"Okay," I say, "Have a good night and call me if you need anything."

"Thanks, Lisa. Tom or I will call you soon."

I would really like to call Lillian to check in with her but I know she's been sick. I decide to call her in the morning when I get to work. Hopefully, she'll be feeling up to talking. I feel like the day went pretty well, considering, especially since I've heard horror stories from Lillian. With Lillian watching her, she once tried to kick through the

door and there was also a time she found a pair of eyebrow scissors in Lillian's makeup bag and tried using them to cut her toes off. I don't know why I haven't seen a psychotic break from her yet – I can never know – but I'm glad I haven't. I'm going to just stick with what I'm doing and hopefully it'll stay that way.

The only thing that concerns me is that I kept the “Mama” thing from Kelly. I suppose I can just tell her if it happens again. Hopefully it won't.

“Alex, please sit down. I'll get it,” I say, later that night while Alex and I eat. I usually won't pick up the house phone at dinnertime but my cell has already rung once from inside my bag and I'm wondering if it's an emergency.

I look at the phone: the Coopers' number blinks on the caller ID.

“Hello?” I ask. I figure it's probably Tom setting up another appointment.

“Lisa?” It's Kelly. And from her tone, I can tell she's upset.

“Yes, Kelly. It's me. Is everything all right? Is Megan okay?” I'm going to have to drop off Alex at Kevin's if Megan needs to go to the hospital.

“Look,” Kelly says. “I *really* didn't want to call you. But, whatever, I did.”

“What is it, Kelly?” I ask, worrying. She sounds angry, not scared, though, so hopefully Megan is okay, after all.

“I'd appreciate it if you told me everything that happens while you're over my house,” Kelly says, in an accusatory tone.

My first thought is that maybe she is talking about how Megan kept calling me her mother because Kelly was so angry the last time that happened, but she'd seemed to

calm down a lot since that time. And would she call me at home about something like that?

She would.

“When Tom got home, Megan asked him what my first name is. She knows my first name. But anyway, he said it and she’s been calling me Kelly ever since. He’s still ‘Daddy,’ yet I’m ‘Kelly,’” Kelly pauses.

I don’t know what to say.

“So,” she goes on. “I ask her why she’s calling me by my first name and not, you know, ‘Mom’ or ‘Mama.’ And she goes on to tell me that her mother left earlier in the afternoon after they were at the pool and colored together.” She pauses again.

“Kelly—” I start.

“No, you wait your turn,” Kelly says, talking to me as if I’m a child. I pause.

“So, Tom tells me it’s not a big deal. Our daughter’s a schizophrenic, you know? Worse things have happened. But she’s been going on with this all night,” Kelly continues, drawing out the word “all.”

“And so, frankly, I’m hurt,” she says. “Understandably so, right?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “I mean, imagine your son started calling someone else ‘Mama’?” I let her continue. I’ve dealt with angry parents before, when I worked at the middle school, and I know it’s best to let them rant, get their anger out, try to calm them down as best as you can, and let them mellow out for awhile. I can understand her frustration, too. I got very paranoid the other night when Alex was talking about Trina. No parent wants to be second best.

“So, she calls me ‘Kelly’ all night, like I’m a stranger or something,” Kelly continues. “So finally, after asking her a million times why she thinks *you’re* her mother, she said that when you were over, you guys held hands and you called her ‘sweetie.’”

I pause, sure she is going to go on, but she doesn’t.

“Kelly, listen,” I start, trying to gather my thoughts. I knew I shouldn’t have called Megan ‘sweetie,’ but it really was just an instinct; it’s hard not to be empathetic when you’re with a sick child. And I don’t recall this handholding thing, but if she just means that Megan took me by the hand to leave and enter rooms, then I don’t really see a problem with that. So I ask her to clarify.

“I’m truly sorry this is happening,” I say, calmly, soothingly. “But I’m just not sure what you mean... by the hand-holding thing. She led me from her room to the kitchen by hand once and, yes, I did call her ‘sweetie,’ once. She had just told me she had a headache.”

“Okay,” Kelly says. “But now she has it in her head that you’re her mother.”

“Remember, she said it was Tristen Marie who said so,” I say. “Her hallucinations are talking, Kelly, not her.”

“I know that,” Kelly says angrily. “But things like handholding and being called ‘sweetie’ don’t help. You just tell her that you’re not her mother when she says something like that and move on. Don’t you think being all lovey-dovey with her is just going to confuse her more?”

I look over at Alex. He’s eating a meatball with his hand.

“Alex, use your fork,” I tell him. He quickly drops the meatball onto his plate.

“What?” Kelly asks, annoyed.

“I’m talking to my son, Kelly. It’s dinnertime.” I am trying hard not to match her tone but I’m starting to get frustrated by the way she’s talking to me.

“Go back to your son, Lisa. I’m sorry for calling. I hope you have a good dinner. Just know mine was ruined,” Kelly says. I detect sadness in her voice. She hangs up.

I click off my phone and put it on the counter.

“Who was that, Mom?” Alex asks me. I sit down next to him and take a bite out of my linguine.

“Just someone from work, honey,” I say, handing him a napkin. There’s meat sauce all over his face and hands. “See what happens when you eat with your hands? You get sauce everywhere.”

“I always get messy with spaghetti, Mom,” he says back, pronouncing spaghetti like ‘pisgetti.’

“True, you do,” I say. “Say spaghetti.”

“Pisgetti,” he responds, wiping at his hands with the napkin. I giggle.

“You’re so cute,” I tell him. “Don’t grow up.”

“I can’t help it, Mom!” he says. “Can I be finished now?” I look at his plate.

“One more bite if you want dessert,” I tell him.

“What’s the dessert?” he asks, suspiciously.

“Chocolate pudding.”

He quickly eats a bite.

“Done!” he exclaims, spaghetti visible in his mouth.

“One more if you want whipped cream on it,” I say, enjoying this.

“Aw, Mom,” he says, mouth still full, and he puts another forkful of linguine in his mouth.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” I say to him, standing up and bringing his plate to the sink. I get a pudding cup from the refrigerator and squirt some whipped cream on top of it. I pass him his dessert and I take my own plate to the sink. I haven’t had a lot to eat, but the pasta just didn’t seem appealing anymore.

I load up the dishwasher and wonder if I should call Lillian now. I once again decide against it. I didn’t want to be bothered at dinner, so why should she? It could wait. I just wish it were already morning.

CHAPTER 7

As I'm not going to the Coopers', I have a short day today. Once the Coopers' and I have a set schedule, I can try and reschedule my other patients who normally come in on random afternoons strictly to the afternoons when I don't see Megan. I can also spread out my morning appointments, if I choose to. Or I can just take half-days on those days, since I have fewer clients now, anyway. I've been doing back-to-back appointments every morning since I've started seeing Megan and it's often both overwhelming and exhausting. Kevin and Trina still aren't well, though Kevin says they will be able to have Alex back with them tomorrow. I'm looking forward to tonight and spending the extra time with my son.

Someone knocks at my door.

"Just a second," I call. I open the door and it's Lillian.

"Hey, Lillian!" I say, "I didn't know you were coming in today. How are you feeling?"

"Feeling pretty good," she says. She looks tired and pale, though. She also looks like she's lost weight since I last saw her in her kitchen. "Can I come in for a minute?" She asks.

"Sure. Yeah. Of course," I say. "Please sit."

"It's good to see you," I say to her. "Are you meeting with clients today?"

“Nope,” she says. “They’re all someone else’s client now.” She presses her lips together and moves her mouth from side to side. I think she’s trying not to cry. “I’m just here wrapping up some HR stuff. I won’t be here long.”

“Oh, okay,” I say. “I wanted to call you and check in and stuff but I figured you needed rest.”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s been a rough few days. But I’ll be all right. Jackie’s been staying with me.”

“That’s good.” I look at her. “Let me know if you ever need anything from me, Lil.”

“I will,” she says. “Listen, Kelly called me last night.”

After hearing about how sick Lillian’s been, I’m irritated to hear that Kelly felt the need to call her, too.

“The ‘mom’ thing?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Lillian responds. She picks up a block from a small table next to where she’s sitting that has a bunch of faces on it – happy faces, sad faces, angry faces. She turns the “sad” one it’s currently on to “content” and sets it down. “She was mad.”

“Yeah,” I say, “She called me, too. She didn’t mention talking to you so she must have called you afterwards. I’m really sorry, Lillian. You didn’t need to be disturbed.”

“No, it’s all right. Don’t worry,” she says. “But she was pretty upset.”

“I know,” I say. “What did she tell you happened?”

“That Megan kept calling her ‘Kelly’ instead of ‘Mom’ and that you didn’t tell her that she was doing so all day.”

“Lillian, it was definitely not all day,” I say, keeping my voice steady. “And I’m sure she failed to tell you that right before I left, Megan slipped into a brief catatonic state. Kelly and I talked about that before I left. To mention just one of her hallucinations didn’t seem especially relevant at the time.”

“No, she didn’t tell me that,” Lillian says.

“No, I bet she was too busy spouting off how angry she was that I called Megan ‘sweetie’ once and ‘held hands’ with her all afternoon.” I’m trying really hard not to get frustrated.

“She did,” Lillian replies, calmly. “But it’s okay. Listen. Kelly tends to overreact. Not to say that she doesn’t have the right to be upset about something related to her child. But she’s gotten extremely angry and emotional with me many times.”

“I was beginning to think it was just me,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“It’s not,” Lillian says. “But I remember her treating me the same way when I first started working with Megan. Just try to avoid being sentimental with Megan, especially with this whole ‘mother’ thing.”

“Lillian, I am. I really am. Megan had a rough day. She kept mentioning Tristen Marie and it seemed as if she was ‘with’ Megan most, if not all, of the day. Then she suddenly got a splitting headache and the word, ‘sweetie,’ slipped out of my mouth. I felt so bad for her. How can you not? And we didn’t hold hands. You know how Megan will grab your hand excitedly? Like as we went from the pool to the kitchen or the bedroom to the bathroom. Alex often does the same thing. I—”

“Lisa,” Lillian interrupts me. “I understand. I was Megan’s doctor before you, remember?”

“I know, sorry,” I say, “I’m just concerned. You heard her; she’s really upset. I don’t want her thinking that I can’t take care of Megan. I really want to help her and this family.”

“She won’t. You’re fantastic at what you do,” Lillian says. “But imagine yourself in her place. You’re the mother of a young child with that severe of a mental illness. You do everything you can for her. Of course you’re going to get upset, jump to conclusions. It’s gotta be tough when your child calls someone else their mother, even when you know it’s her hallucinations talking.”

“I do,” I reply. “That’s another reason why I didn’t mention it to her at first. I know how upset she got that time Megan first said it, when you were there. I didn’t know Megan was going to keep going with it the whole night. Otherwise, I obviously would have brought it up. I feel for Kelly. I can’t even imagine if Alex was going through what Megan is. It must be truly horrifying.”

Lillian looks up at the clock; it’s 8:03 a.m. I’d almost completely forgotten that Julia is coming in early today.

“Listen,” she says, standing. “I know you have clients to see so I’ll let you go. But I also want to let you know that I talked with Tom, too.”

“He called you, too?” I ask, also standing.

“No,” Lillian responds. “Mollie started crying so Kelly had to get off the phone. So I spoke briefly with Tom afterwards. Kelly wasn’t around. He is not concerned with the situation. He’s upset that Kelly’s upset but he told me he was going to talk with her after the kids went to sleep. He’s noticed huge improvements in Megan’s attention span

since you started seeing her. She's been hallucinating less and sleeping better. He sees yesterday as simply a bad day. You're doing well, Lisa. Something's working."

"That's so good to hear," I tell Lillian, as we stop at her office.

"I checked in with him a little while ago on his way to work and he says Kelly is doing better. She's still upset but better. She does want to meet with the both of us, though, to try and 'figure out' why Megan thinks you're her mom," Lillian tells me, unlocking her door.

"Oh geez, Lillian, that's not necessary," I tell her, embarrassed. "There's no need for you to worry about this. You don't need this; you should be resting. I can handle it." I'm even more embarrassed now for implying that she needs to stay home and rest all day.

"Lisa," Lillian says. "It's okay. I can pop in for a bit. Paula checked your schedule and you don't have any clients after 1 o'clock tomorrow. Jessica and Scott don't either, so they are going to watch Megan and Mollie while we chat with the Coopers'."

"Jeez, Lillian," I say, flushing. "Tom's taking the day off?"

"Yeah, but don't worry," Lillian says, rubbing my shoulder in an attempt to calm me down. "But this is all for Kelly. It's not a big deal, I promise."

"Okay," I say, believing her.

"So get them off your mind until tomorrow. I'll see you in your office a little bit before one."

"Okay," I repeat. "Thanks, Lillian."

I make my way down the hall to get Julia. She gets up from her seat in the waiting room and gives me a small smile. Her eyes have large bags under them and her hair is clearly unwashed. I instantly stop thinking about Megan; this woman needs and deserves my full attention.

Kelly and Tom are in Lillian's office well before 1 p.m. the next day. After my last client of the day left my office around 12:30 p.m., I went to see if Lillian was already in her office and was taken aback when I saw them all sitting there.

"Oh, hi everyone," I say awkwardly, stepping into the room.

"There she is," Lillian says, as if I'm late.

"My last client just left," I say. "Hi, Kelly. Hi, Tom. Do you all want to move into my office?"

"Why don't we just stay here?" Lillian suggests. "There's more room in here, anyway." I notice her wince in pain as she shifts in her chair.

"Of course," I say, closing the door behind me quickly. Tom and Kelly have already taken Lillian's two seats. I stand there awkwardly.

"Why don't you get another chair from your office, Lisa?" Lillian asks. Kelly stares at me.

I rush out and roll my desk chair into Lillian's office and again, close the door behind me. I pull my seat up next to Lillian's so Tom and Kelly are across from both of us.

I tell myself to breathe.

"How are you guys?" I ask them, bringing an air of confidence to my voice.

“We’re fine, thanks,” Tom says with a small smile. “And you?”

“I’m good, thanks,” I say. The room falls silent. I speak.

“How’s Megan doing?” I ask, trying my best to look at both Tom and Kelly equally, though Kelly’s frown is slightly unnerving.

“She’s good. We’ve had a good few days,” Tom says. “Right, Kelly?” He asks his wife.

“Yeah, for the most part,” Kelly says, looking at me. She lets out a small sigh and clasps her hands on her lap. “Listen. I’m sorry that I’m doing this. It’s just been hard. When we mentioned coming here today, Megan was excited to see her ‘mom.’ You.” She nods at me. “She’s been good, though, other than that. She’s been more present than we’ve seen her in awhile. She’s happy. She is bothered a lot by her hallucinations but she’s been playing with Mollie and swimming a lot. She misses you, though.” Kelly says sadly, looking down.

“Kelly, don’t apologize,” I say. “It’s a difficult thing to deal with. Extremely difficult. And you guys are wonderful parents. I look at Lillian. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot and I really think this may be just an adjustment thing. Lillian was Megan’s doctor for quite awhile.” Lillian nods.

“It’s a big change,” I continue. “For everyone. But I promise you that she loves both of you. Despite her illness, I can tell she is a happy girl.” I’m not sure if I have the right to ‘promise’ the Coopers’ that their daughter loves them, but I honestly believe she does.

“I know. But it’s hard,” Kelly repeats. Her eyes well up. Tom holds her hand.

“I think you have an exceptional daughter. Daughters,” I say. Lillian hands Kelly a tissue. “Megan will go through her ups and downs, as all children do. I will do my absolute best to make sure she has more ups than downs and that her downs are as short-lived and minor, as possible. We have to trust each other, though.” That last line sounded corny but it’s true: I can’t be Megan’s doctor if her mother doesn’t trust that I’m doing my absolute best.

“I’m bipolar,” Kelly bursts out. “I have severe anxiety and depression. I take medicine for it but I don’t see a therapist anymore. I just don’t have time.”

I’m not surprised. I want to tell her that I also suffer from generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. But I’m not the patient here. I completely understand where she’s coming from, though. I don’t have the time to do anything but see my own psychiatrist every few months, simply for the pills.

Other than my psychiatrist up in Espanola, Lillian is the only person who knows about my mental illness. I’ve never told Kevin, nor any other colleagues or friends. I don’t think it makes me “weak”; mental illness is not a weakness. I’m not embarrassed about it. The Klonopin helps when it gets really bad and I also take an antidepressant, Celexa, daily. I simply don’t feel it necessary to tell others when I feel as if I generally handle it well. If someone asked me, then maybe I would talk about it. But no one’s ever asked. Not one person. Kevin never asked. He just assumed I didn’t care enough.

My illness has never affected how I deal with patients until Megan came along; I feel strong and confident when I’m able to help others. I know I should make the time to see a therapist, but through a combination of taking my medicine and throwing myself into my work, I’ve been able to keep my anxiety and depression at bay.

But the past few months have admittedly been tough. Lillian's diagnosis hit me hard; she's always been my confidant. I have my weak moments with her, but I think it's because she allows me to. She's like me—she'd rather help others than admit she needs help herself. Knowing I will lose her soon scares me. My mother and father passed years ago, too young, two weeks apart. My father suffered a massive heart attack when he got home from being out walking during a chilly December day and died instantly. My mother, who was in the hospital at the time with severe asthma and pneumonia, was devastated. I've always told myself that she died of a broken heart.

I loved my parents more than I've ever loved anyone, except for Alex, of course. They believed in me, their only daughter, to their cores. I've wanted to help people since I was a child and when I decided to major in psychology in college, they were so proud of me. I try not to think about them because it hurts too much. I hate to think of how my father was alone when he died and that my mother missed him so much that she just didn't want to fight anymore.

I look at Kelly. Tom continues to hold her hand tightly.

"Kelly," I tell her, looking into her eyes. "Make the time to see someone. I will watch Megan."

Tom speaks up. "I've tried to get her to see someone. I can work different hours. But she won't do it."

Kelly looks at the clock. "I know I should. I just can't right now. It just doesn't seem right to sit around talking about myself when I have two children who need me."

“I understand,” I tell her. “I do. I promise I do.” From the corner of my eye, I can see Lillian look at me.

Kelly looks at me for a long moment and smiles. She gets it.

Tom looks at her. He sees her smile and he smiles.

I look at Lillian. She smiles.

“Maybe I can find someone who works on weekends,” Kelly says quietly. “Tom can watch her and you don’t need to spend any less time with your son that you already do.”

“We can help you find a doctor,” I say to Kelly. “Don’t forget that you’re also a person. You deserve to be happy.” I think I’m talking to myself, too.

Lillian steps in. “I completely agree with Lisa. Don’t let this go, Kelly. For now, let me offer you some advice.” She leans forward in her chair. “When Megan refers to Lisa as her mother or refers to you as ‘Kelly,’ try and do your absolute best to just remain calm and remind her that she’s hallucinating. Talk to her about all the great times you’ve spent together, like when you three went to Disneyland or when you guys go to her favorite restaurant. Megan’s illness, of course, makes her unpredictable. It may take her a while to understand; her hallucinations will also likely push her even more. But it will pass. Unfortunately, her hallucinations will likely tell her other false things, but they will also push her past this. She does need your help, though.”

I chime in. “When needed, I will also remind her that I’m her doctor and there to help her, but that she also needs the two of you. She’s a smart girl. She knows she’s sick. She’ll keep fighting her hallucinations. I will work to get rid of those Tristens,” I say, giving the Coopers’ a small smile.

“Those fucking Tristens,” Kelly says and laughs through a leftover sob.

I smile at her and hand her a tissue.

“Thank you so much for meeting with us,” Tom says. “You okay, Kel? You want to take the girls out to lunch?” Kelly stands.

“Sure, she says, “That’ll be an adventure.” She laughs again and looks at me.

“I’ll call you soon, Lisa?”

“Sounds good,” I say.

“See you guys,” Tom says, leading his wife out of the room.

I look at Lillian. “Should I go say hi to Megan?”

“Nah,” she replies. You’ve done your work for the day. Go get yourself some lunch, too.”

“Are you heading home?” I ask her.

“Heading to Jackie’s. My granddaughter, Tina, has a ballet recital later this afternoon.” Lillian smiles at me. “Retirement is going to be great.”

I gently hug Lillian before I leave.

“Take your own advice, Lisa. Go get some help for yourself,” she tells me, pulling back from me.

“I will,” I tell her. “Enjoy your afternoon. Thanks again.”

“You betcha, kiddo.”

CHAPTER 8

I take Lillian's advice to enjoy the rest of my afternoon. I drive to downtown Santa Fe to spend the rest of the afternoon to just be by myself, outside in the gorgeous weather, while around others, but being anonymous. I grab a pumpernickel bagel from my favorite coffee shop and munch on it as I walk around, thinking.

I knew I've been taking more Klonopin lately than usual, but I didn't realize just how distressed I've been feeling the past few months until I saw Kelly break down. I've worried about almost everything and everyone I could: Chelsie, Alex, Kevin, Trina, Brian, Julia, Megan and her parents, Lillian and her illness, and now my own mental state. I've never worried about my son and Trina's relationship until recently. I'm allowing myself to think about my parents again. I let the pressure of taking on Megan's case and trying to ease Lillian's suffering and didn't allow myself much time to worry about myself, or enjoy myself. This has been the case most of my life; I've always been the listener and not the talker. I've always taken others' pain to heart.

As I walk around, looking through shop windows, I decide to take some control of my own life; it's overdue. There are a few things that I've been wanting to do for years now and while now might not be the best time as Lillian's growing sicker and I'm trying to rebuild my relationship with the Coopers, I decide that I need to put myself first and the rest will hopefully fall into place, as well. I've still got that spontaneous side in me, I guess, despite my slight hesitations.

I walk through a few art galleries and stop at a painting of a ballerina stuck in a pirouette pose. For some reason, I honestly can't say why, I've been entranced by ballerinas all my life. Perhaps it's the fluidity of the dance. Maybe it's the structure. I buy the painting; it costs eight hundred dollars but I never buy anything for myself. So why not? I'm going to put it up in my bedroom.

Before I pick up Alex. I ask them if they can call my patients and reschedule their appointments for the rest of the week until next week, at the same time they would have this week. I then head home and book a flight to California for the weekend.

Alex always calls his father right before his bedtime when he's with me, just like he does with me when he's with Kevin. I ask Alex to make sure he gives me the phone after he's done talking and to not hang up. I know he'll forget so while I'm loading up the dishwasher and wiping down the kitchen table and countertops, I try and pay attention to Alex's side of the conversation in hopes of sensing the end of it so I can get on the phone before he hangs it up. I know that's useless. How do you listen to just a child's end of the conversation and conclude anything? You don't.

"Don't forget that I need to talk to your dad when you get off, Alex," I say to him.

"Okay, Mom," he replies. "She wants to talk to you when I'm done talking," Alex then says to his dad. "I don't know," he says into the phone.

Alex hands it to me a minute later.

"Kevin?" I say, nervously.

“What’s up?” Kevin asks. The two of us only talk about Alex or about our time with him.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“Much better. Trina and I appreciate you watching Alex the past few days,” he responds. He sounds a little stuffed up, but I can tell he’s much better now than he’s been.

“Of course. I’d love to spend any night with him,” I say. We pause.

I have something to tell you,” I say. I breathe deeply so I don’t freak out.

“What?” He replies suspiciously.

“It’s important,” I say to him, stalling.

“Lisa, spit it out,” Kevin says.

“Are you busy? Do you have a few minutes?”

“Yes.” He sounds nervous now.

“Okay,” I start. “Well, it’s not bad or anything. Alex is fine. It’s about me.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I pause. “I know we don’t talk much anymore...”

“Lisa, please. I’m starting to get nervous here.”

“Okay,” I begin again. Well, I’m nervous all the time. That’s what this is about.”

“Huh?” Kevin says.

“I was diagnosed with severe anxiety and clinical depression shortly after my parents died. I never told you. And now I have to. Stuff has been happening at work that made me realize that.”

“Oh,” he says, after a moment.

“Yeah.”

“That was over six years ago, Lisa,” he says.

“Yeah,” I repeat.

“How bad is it?” He asks. I hear him cracking his knuckles. He does that when he’s nervous.

“Well. I manage it. Sometimes well, sometimes – not so much,” I say.

“So... you were depressed when we were married and had Alex and stuff?”

“Yes.”

Kevin suddenly gets angry. “Why are you suddenly telling me this now, Lisa? A vague response about work isn’t enough.”

“It doesn’t make up for why I didn’t tell you before, I know. But it is work that made me finally realize that I need to tell you,” I glance over at Alex, who’s content, watching his *Shrek* DVD.

“Why? I’m really sorry to hear that, Lisa... but why?”

“Because then maybe you will stop thinking I’m a bad mother to Alex.” I don’t know why I’m saying this. I know I’m a good mother.

“I never said you were a bad mother, Lisa,” he tells me.

“No, you didn’t,” I say, “I just always assumed that was the main reason why you wanted a divorce.”

“Um, no... hang on, Lisa,” He says, putting his hand over the phone. I couldn’t make out what he was saying, but I assume he’s talking to his wife, Trina.

“Sorry,” he says to me quietly about a minute later. “Um, yeah, so anyway, we divorced because we weren’t compatible.”

“And because I was busy with work,” I add.

“Yeah,” he says, sounding somewhat surprised. “That’s right.”

“I still am a workaholic, Kevin,” I say to him. “I’m not sure that will ever go away. I’m not sure I want it to. I’ve only come to realize lately just how much I’ve been using work as a way to distract myself from my own anxiety.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Yeah,” I continue, “And there’s nothing I can do about the past now, but I’m not going to hide it anymore. And Kevin, I’m sorry I never told you.”

He’s silent. “Why didn’t you just tell me before, Lisa?”

“I couldn’t. I just couldn’t,” I feel tears start to stream down my face. I push them away with one hand and take a deep breath. “Honestly, I was so mad that you never noticed. I was so devastated over the loss of my parents.”

“Lisa. I noticed. I couldn’t believe how quickly you went back to work,” Kevin says. “I asked you so many times if you were okay, asked you so many times over the years we were married why you felt like you couldn’t talk to me. How could I know that things were more serious than you just didn’t want to talk to me about anything? You’re the shrink.”

“I don’t know, but I just thought we knew each other well enough to know when something was really wrong,” I reply.

“Lisa,” Kevin says, sounding slightly frustrated. “I knew you had your problems. We both had our own problems. But you refused to talk about anything. That was your mistake. My mistake was that I let you.”

“I just want to let you know that I’m sorry,” I say, not knowing if I should say any more over the phone. I don’t even know if what I’m saying is what I want to say. Frankly, I don’t even know what that is. But ever since I left Lillian’s office this afternoon, I felt that I owed Kevin an explanation. I don’t want his forgiveness and I don’t want his pity. I fell out of love with Kevin when he did with me. But he’s the father of my child and if I needed to come clean about my illness to anyone, it was he.

“You don’t have to say you’re sorry,” he responds quietly. “I just hope you are getting the treatment you need. And I really do wish you told me earlier. I would have understood.”

“I know. I know all that. I will get help.” That’s all he needed to know.

“Okay,” he says.

“I’ll let you go,” I say.

“Take care of yourself, Lisa,” he says, sounding a bit sad. “Know that you can still talk to me.”

“Thanks,” I reply. I don’t think I need to say anymore.

“Hey, Lisa?” Kevin says.

“Yeah?”

“I want to tell you something, too.” Now it’s he who sounds a bit nervous.

“Oh, yeah?” I say.

“Trina and I are expecting. She’s about three months along. I’d like to tell Alex soon that he’s going to have a baby brother.”

“I’m really happy for you, Kevin.” I really am. “Alex will be so excited.”

“Yeah, I think he will,” Kevin says. “Alex’s birthday is coming up,” he says, “Maybe the three of us and Trina can finally get together.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, thinking that it won’t likely happen. For years now, Alex has been the only thing Kevin and I have in common. I don’t see this conversation changing that. That isn’t my intent, either.

“Hey. Let’s all go to Friendly’s Friday night,” Kevin says, surprising me again. “If you don’t mind us tagging along.”

“I don’t mind,” I say. “Though I am taken aback. I don’t really know Trina. And I barely see you anymore.”

“Whatever,” Kevin says. “It’ll be awkward. But it’ll be nice to see you. And I know Alex will be happy seeing us all in the same place again.”

I remain in a bit of shock as we make a plan to meet there at 6 p.m. on Friday.

We hang up.

I look over at Alex. It’s well past his bedtime now but I want to be with him for longer.

“Alex,” I say, cautiously, sitting down on the floor next to him. He’s watching *Shrek*. “Would you like it your dad and Trina come to Friendly’s with us on Sunday?”

“Yeah,” Alex replies, sounding happy, not taking his eyes away from the TV screen. I smile. Not much can worry a four-year-old.

I let him finish the movie. He lies down and puts his head in my lap. The only time he makes a sound is when he laughs.

CHAPTER 9

Dinner on Friday is fine, albeit somewhat awkward as Kevin and I suspected. Trina and I only really make small talk; she says she likes my purse and I ask her how work is. Still, it is nice to all be together, especially for Alex's sake.

I look at Kevin, who's holding Trina's hand under the table. Trina throws her head back and laughs at something he says. I've never noticed her front teeth are a little crooked and jagged. For some reason, that makes me like her a bit more.

"How are you, honey?" I ask Alex, patting him on the knee. "School and daycare were good."

"Yep," Alex says. "I wrote a poem."

"You did?" I exclaim, clearly excited by this. Trina and Kevin look up. "Alex just told me he wrote a poem today in school," I say to them.

"Oh wow, dude," Kevin says. He's always called Alex that. I think it's funny how many pet names and nicknames Alex has. "Do you have it with you?"

"No, it's in the car," Alex says, eating two fries at once.

I'm bummed. I love seeing and hearing everything Alex does at school. I don't think I'll ever throw away all the handmade things he's given me: ornaments, paintings, etc.

"It's about flowers and colors and stuff," Alex says, looking at me.

I look over at Kevin and Trina with a smile.

"Is it something like 'Roses are red; violets are blue'?" I ask Alex.

“How’d you know that?” Alex asks me suspiciously.

“Good motherly intuition,” I tell him. He makes a face at me, not understanding what I’m saying, but goes back to eating his food.

We soon get our ice cream sundaes to go. Just before we separate to head to our cars, I tell them that I will be out of town “for work” tomorrow and ask Alex to call me Sunday before bedtime. They don’t ask me any specifics. I’m glad. I’d also texted Kevin earlier and asked him not to mention Trina’s pregnancy and he’d agreed. I’m also glad about that.

The following day, after I land in San Francisco, I drive my rental car to a hotel near the psychiatric hospital in Malibu.

I had called the hospital just before I’d booked my flight to California to see if they needed volunteers this weekend. Julie, the doctor I spoke with on the phone, said they have been understaffed for a while now and can always use extra staff or volunteers, especially those who’ve worked in the mental health setting. I’ve never met Julie but she says that Cora still works there. She’s working today and I look forward to seeing her. I didn’t ask Julie on the phone if Chelsie was still there, though I wanted to; she’s the reason I’m in back here in the first place. I’m desperate to see if she’s gotten any better or back living with her parents, but I know, deep down, that she isn’t going to get any better—no matter where she is.

When I arrive at the hospital, it’s group time. Julie and Cora ask each patient what their favorite song is and then the group learns it together. I smile. We used to do the same activity when I used to work here.

I join them. “Hi everyone,” I say, “I’m Lisa. I’ll be hanging out with you all for a little while.”

An older woman named April says hi back to me and a few teenage boys nod at me.

I look around for Chelsie; she’s not there. Maybe she’s in her room.

We sing “Bohemian Rhapsody.” It’s fun and mostly everyone is laughing. Even the sullen teenage boys.

After we sing, and the patients line up for their afternoon meds, I know I can’t just walk around, looking into rooms for Chelsie, so I ask Cora if she’s still at the hospital.

“Oh, Lisa,” Cora starts, sadly. No, please don’t. Don’t say it. “I’m so sorry to tell you this,” she continues. “But Chelsie’s parents stopped paying for her treatment. It was too expensive here. She went back home to live with them and we found out about a year later that she’d committed suicide.”

I purse my lips together and try not to cry but I can’t help it—tears fill my eyes.

“That poor girl,” I say, my voice cracking. “I need to use the bathroom, Cora. Excuse me.”

“Take your time, honey,” Cora calls after me.

I go into the staff bathroom. It’s empty and I go to the mirror, grabbing a few paper towels on the way. I dab at my eyes while I stare at my reflection.

My head is screaming at me that it’s my fault Chelsie is dead. But I lean over the sink and tell myself that it isn’t. I know it’s not. But it hurts nonetheless. I promise

myself that I will do everything I can to help Megan so she doesn't suffer the same fate as Chelsie.

I stay at the hospital for a few more hours, talking to the two boys who I'd met in Group earlier. They are both heroin addicts and currently being weaned off the heroin with methadone. John and Josh are their names. They ask me to come back another time as I say I have to leave to get my son. I tell them I will be back but they better not still be here when I do.

Later on, back in my hotel room, I order room service and watch some crappy horror movie from the 90s.

I'd tried my best for Chelsie, years ago, when I was at the hospital with her. I couldn't heal her mental illness or stop it from progressing, but I'd really tried to let her know she had a friend, in any way I could. I don't know if she knew that or not. I wonder if she ever even realized I left. And if she did, did that upset her? I hate to think about that.

My food grows cold.

I think about the boys I met today. Maybe I will come back here to see them, but I know they won't be there. I just hope they'll get better.

I walk along the beach the next morning, a few hours before I have to go to the airport. I don't have a swimsuit with me but I take my sandals off and walk on the water's edge. It's so warm. I need to start remembering to bring a swimsuit with me at all times, apparently.

I wonder if Chelsie ever got to the beach. I wonder if Megan will ever get to.

CHAPTER 10

The next time I see the Coopers is Tuesday night. I want to spend time with the whole Cooper family and in order to do so, it has to be when Tom gets out of work.

I have a set schedule with the Coopers now – starting next week, I’ll be there Monday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons at 1 p.m., unless they also need me in case of an emergency. I’m only going to work half days at the office on Fridays so I can see a therapist before I go to dinner with Alex. I’d called my psychiatrist’s office this morning to see if they had any available therapists to take me on as a client. I was pleasantly surprised, and nervous, to hear that I now have an appointment this Friday with a woman named Kristy.

Kelly has made a big pot roast for us all. I decide I want to learn to cook more after tasting it. So good. My macaroni and spaghetti dinners are getting old, anyway. At the dinner table, I ask Megan if she’s ever been to the museum where Alex loves to go. I tell her about the rocks and minerals exhibit that he loves.

“No!” Megan exclaims. “Can we go, Mama? Can we?”

Everyone pauses. Megan is looking down at her plate. We didn’t know whom she was referring to.

“Sure, Megan. Maybe one of the next weekends coming up,” Kelly says quickly.

Megan eats a French fry.

“Can we get a dog?” she asks her father.

“Maybe,” Tom responds. He looks at Kelly and me and mouths, “Not happening.”

“Why are you having dinner with us tonight?” Megan asks me.

“I want to spend some time with you, your mom and your dad,” I tell her. “I won’t be over for dinner much, but I couldn’t resist the offer of your mom’s delicious meal. I’ll just be coming to take care of you and help get you better from now on.”

“You mean my schizophrenia?” she asks.

“Yup,” I say, watching her swirl a fry around in ketchup. “That’s right.”

“Okay,” Megan says. “Can I watch TV now?” she asks, looking at Kelly.

“If you eat two more bites of your pot roast, then yes,” Kelly replies.

“But I don’t like it!” Megan yells.

“Then no TV.”

Megan put two small pieces of pot roast into her mouth. “Now?” she asks. She reminds me of Alex right now. I smile.

“Swallow,” Tom says.

Megan spits out the pot roast. “Tristen Susie says I will die if I swallow.”

“What do the other Tristens say to you?” I ask her, making sure I emphasize that they only speak to her.

“They’re not here. But Tristen Susie is next to you and she will throw up pot roast on you if I have to eat anymore.”

Kelly sighs. “Go ahead and watch TV, Megan. Put your plate on the counter first.”

“Tristen Susie isn’t here, Megan.” I say. She stops and looks at me. “She’s not real. There’s no way she can throw up on me because she didn’t eat any pot roast.”

“I know she didn’t,” Megan says, after a pause. “But she’s there. She’s always there.”

“Do you want her to go away?” I ask. Tom and Kelly are staring at me.

Megan looks at me, confused. Then she leans over and whispers into my ear.

“Yeah.”

“I will help you,” I whisper back. “I know she’s mean and scary but I won’t let her hurt you. I’m a doctor and I can help you get rid of her. And all the Tristens. But you need to try and ignore her. Don’t let her tell you what to do. Your mom and dad won’t let anything happen to you or Mollie.”

Megan looks at me cautiously. “Maybe,” she says, and runs into the living room. Her plate remains on the table.

“What did you say to her?” Kelly asks, standing and bringing Megan’s plate to the counter.

“I told her that I’d help her make the Tristens go away if she tries to ignore them. That you guys won’t let anything happen to her.”

Kelly turns and looks at me. “Okay.”

I smile at her and thank her for dinner. I tell her I’m going to sit with Megan for a bit so she and Tom can relax. She’s thrilled with that.

“Stay overnight, if you want to!” She laughs.

I go into the living room and sit down next to Megan on the Coopers’ plush, black leather couch. She’s watching *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. I laugh when a

video comes on that shows a cat jumping up on the ledge of a bathtub, where a little girl is taking a bubble bath. The cat falls in and manages to climb its way out, spraying soapsuds everywhere as it peels out of the bathroom.

Megan looks up at me. “Do you like cats?” she asks.

“I do,” I say. “I used to have one when I was a kid. Her name was Jen and she was gray and very fluffy.”

Megan smiles at that. “I want a kitten!” she says.

I change the subject so she doesn’t go running into the kitchen to beg her parents for a cat. I tell her that Alex has been writing poems and ask her if she likes to write.

“Um, yeah,” she says, watching the TV.

“Do you want to write something for me? A poem or a story or something?”

“All right.” Megan jumps up, runs into the kitchen to ask her mom for a piece of paper and a pen. She comes back with two crayons and two pieces of paper and we sit on the floor, our backs against the couch, leaning over the coffee table. “We have to use crayons,” she says, and gives me the purple one.

I watch as Megan begins to write a story about the cat on TV and then stops:

The kitty cat jumped into the shower.

Her name is Jen and she likes to eat hamburg

I tell Megan to keep going. She makes a small face, looking confused.

“But I’m done,” she says. “That’s my story.”

“I like it a lot so far,” I tell her. “But you didn’t finish the word ‘hamburger.’”

“Yes, I did,” she replies, standing. “That’s how we spell it.”

I ignore the “we.”

“But you left off the ‘er.’ Right now, it just says ‘hamburg.’”

“I know that,” Megan says, irritated, throwing down her crayon. “But that’s how we spell it.”

“Who is ‘we’?” I ask her, still sitting. “Sit down, Megan.” I pat the carpet next to me.

“Who do you think?” Megan says. “I’m not going to write anymore. I can’t give away any more secrets.” She sits back on the couch and watches TV.

I pick up her crayon up from the floor, put it on the coffee table, and sit down next to her on the couch.

She doesn’t talk to me for the rest of the time I’m here. I leave after about an hour.

When I get home, I don’t want to think about anything related to mental illness so I take my Celexa and turn on the game show network. *Family Feud* is on. That’ll do.

CHAPTER 11

Kelly told me Tuesday night that she needs to take Mollie to the doctor for a check-up so I'm alone with Megan today, Thursday. This time, I remember to bring my bathing suit. I splash around with Megan and we laugh as we hit each other gently with large orange and blue pool noodles.

"Can we go in the deep end?" Megan asks.

"Yes," I respond. "But you need to sit in the tube and let me hold it."

She shrugs and I help her climb into the tube.

I push her around in the deep end for a while.

"You know I can swim in this, right?" Megan says, "My daddy lets me."

"I know, Megan," I say, "I believe you. But I don't want to take any chances with your parents not here. Maybe later."

"Fine," she accepts, unenthusiastically.

A little while later, I towel Megan off after she's washed the chlorine off of her in the outdoor shower.

"Do you want to read to me for a bit or maybe we can go on the computer for a little while and you can do some math problems?" I ask Megan on our way into the house; I'm running after her as usual. Kelly told me Megan loves math.

"Um. No," Megan says.

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I wanna dance," she says. That's a new one.

“Okay,” I say, “Let’s go upstairs so we can change.”

I help Megan into shorts and her favorite purple tee shirt and then I go and quickly change in the bathroom.

Megan runs downstairs and straight to the family’s desktop. She waits for me to type in the password, which Kelly told me was “Pickles2012.” I’d laughed when she told me that and I asked her why that was the password. She’d also laughed and said Tom made it up; he apparently loves to eat pickles.

Megan sits in front of the computer and turns on iTunes. She scrolls through the list and selects the same Justin Bieber song that Alex has been listening to.

We dance together. She puts it on again after it ends. And then again. I ask her if she wants to put on a new song and she says she doesn’t care.

I find “Bohemian Rhapsody” and put it on. Definitely not a dancing song but I take Megan by the arms and swing her around while I sing to it.

“This is for my friend, Chelsie,” I tell her. She shrugs and says okay.

She grows tired of dancing after a little while and we do some math problems. I can’t believe that she knows as much as she does, though I shouldn’t be surprised.

We head up to her room to play Monopoly. In the middle of the game, she lies down on her back.

“What’s wrong, Megan?” I ask her, concerned.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” she says, scratching at her eyes.

“Why not?” I ask her.

“I just don’t!” She screams and jumps up. “Stop asking!”

“Okay,” I say, looking up at her. “What do you want to do?”

She frowns and looks down at me. "I don't know."

"Do you want to play another game?" I stand up and look through her toy bin.

"You have Candy Land. I love that game."

"Okay!" She plops back down on the floor.

I tell her my favorite character is the Queen and she immediately wants to be the Queen. I don't say anything and take the Lollypop Princess, instead.

I do my best to let her win but she won't let me. Then she calls me a cheater when I win and flings the board and all her cards in the air and starts screaming.

"Megan, calm down," I say to her. "It's okay; we can play again."

"I don't want to," she screams and kicks me in the shin.

I have to restrain her. "Ow, Megan! Don't do that! You hurt me!"

She continues to scream and kick at me. I let her do so until she appears to wear herself out.

"Are you done now?" I ask her.

She doesn't respond and struggles to get out of my grasp. I let her run to her bed. She climbs in it.

"You hurt me, Megan," I say, standing over her.

"It's not my fault," she finally responds.

"Why not?" I ask. "You're the one who kicked me."

Megan motions for me to lean towards her. I'm afraid she's going to pull my hair or hit my face but she just whispers into my ear.

"She told me to."

"Megan," I say, sitting on the bed. "No one's here but the two of us."

“They left,” she says, looking at the door. “But they’ll be back. And they’ll make me kick you again.”

“Who?” I know the answer.

“Tristen Susie and Tristen Cassandra. And Tristen Marie.”

“I won’t let them come in,” I say to her. She cowers. “I’ll lock the door.”

“They have a key.”

“No, they don’t. Only your mom and dad do,” I say, wishing there was something else I could do, other than try and convince her that no one would ever hurt her, other than herself.

“They come into my room at night and dance around my bed. Tristen Susie makes me hit myself if I don’t dance.” Megan looks up at me, scared.

“Don’t hit yourself, Megan. They’re just in your imagination. They aren’t real.”

I watch as her eyes slowly shift towards her door.

“Megan,” I say. “What is it? What are you looking at?”

She doesn’t answer. Her eyes grow wide.

“Megan, talk to me, please.”

She looks at the space next to me.

“What is it?” I ask her. I plead with her to tell me what she’s looking at.

“It’s nothing, Mama,” she says. Suddenly, she sighs and I watch her body relax.

I head to Lillian’s for lunch on Saturday. She’s not feeling well but called me this morning, asking me for my company. “Of course,” I’d told her.

She opens the door for me and we head straight to her bedroom. She gets into bed and asks me to sit down. I pull the desk chair up to her bed.

“Oh, Lillian,” I say. “I hate to see you like this.”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” she says. “Just feeling a little blue but I wanted to check in with you, see how you are. How things are going.”

“Things are good, Lillian,” I say to her. “We miss you at the office.”

“I probably won’t be back,” Lillian says. “Maybe I should have gone with the chemotherapy. Oh well. Too late now.”

“Lil,” I start. “You’re so strong. How are you this strong?”

“Because I have to be. I don’t really have a choice now, anyway.”

“Lillian, you’re allowed to show emotion, especially now. I’m finally learning that I can, too.”

“I’m going to be living with my oldest daughter, Marie, until... you know,” she says, sighing. “I have movers coming Tuesday.”

I look around her room. Despite her modern kitchen and living room, her bedroom looks like one of a 64-year-old. She has a small, maybe 13-inch, TV on a nightstand, and has pictures of her family in old, faded gold frames on her walls. Her bed even has a canopy.

I smile at her. “I’m glad to hear that. She’ll take good care of you.”

“Yeah, and it’ll be nice to see my grandkids, too.”

“They’ll be so happy to see you,” I say to her. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“Oh jeez. Here I am, inviting you over to lunch and I forget to actually make something.” She sighs again and starts to sit up.

“Lillian,” I say to her in a stern voice. “Don’t you dare move.”

She obediently lies back down.

“I took ‘lunch’ as hanging out, anyway.” I tell her. But I’ll gladly make you something. Any excuse to be in your gorgeous kitchen, anyway.”

“Can you heat me up a bowl of chicken noodle?” She asks. Soups are in the pantry and there’s some Tupperware containers in the cabinet above the stove.”

“Of course,” I say.

I heat up a bowl of chicken noodle for her and Italian wedding for me.

“Do you want anything to drink, Lil?” I call to her. She doesn’t respond.

“Lillian, anything to drink?” I ask, leaning my head into her room. She’s asleep, even snoring a little.

I cover her bowl of soup and put it into the fridge. I take my bowl with me into her room and turn her TV on low. She only has a few channels so I sit with her and watch an infomercial on tummy tucks. If Lillian were awake, she would have laughed at me. And I would have loved it. But I’m just glad I can be with her.

Kelly calls me very early Monday morning, while I’m getting ready for work. She begs me to come over as Megan is acting psychotic. She tells me that Megan hasn’t been doing well, that she’s been on-and-off catatonic since last night. When she isn’t catatonic, she’s psychotic. She’s thrown shoes and food at her parents, vomited while they tried to get her to brush her teeth, and repeatedly kept trying to bang her head against her bedroom wall. Eventually, Kelly had to give her some of her Ambien and Megan fell asleep around 2 a.m. Despite the sleeping pill, she only slept five hours and

has been running around, screaming and crying all morning. Tom had asked one of their neighbors to watch Mollie overnight to make sure she remained safe.

Kelly tells me that Tom still had to go into work for a few hours, as there's an emergency with one of his patients. I don't know what that means, and I don't ask. Kelly says that he took Mollie with him, as someone else can watch her while he's working. I tell Kelly that of course I will come over and to not hesitate to call 911 until I get there is Megan becomes even more out of control. I don't have any patients scheduled in the morning, and I was supposed to go to the Coopers' this afternoon, anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem.

On the way to the Coopers', I call work to let them know I won't be able to attend the staff meeting at 9 a.m. I'm not sure what the meeting is even about but I'm told it's not an issue to miss it; it's just a "progress" meeting; we have them all the time. We all just sit around, eat catered food and discuss any major progress or setbacks in our cases. This is done confidentially, meaning without using any names or details about our clients. We have these meetings about every 5-6 months.

As soon as I reach the Coopers' front door, I can hear the sound of Megan screaming inside. Kelly opens the door after about a minute and we rush back up the stairs to Megan's room. Up in her room, Megan is lying on the floor, face down, screaming and crying into the rug. I notice Kelly has some red marks on her face and arms and I assume they're from Megan hitting her. As I lean down to see what's going on with Megan, I urge Kelly to leave the house for a bit or her sanity and safety. She agrees and says she'll call in a bit. She hesitates at the door, looking at her daughter, and then walks quickly down the stairs.

“Megan,” I say to her loudly before I get too close to her. “It’s me, Lisa. Stop screaming and look at me.”

Megan rolls over and kicks my shin. She screams at the top of her lungs.

“Megan, stop it,” I calmly say to her as she keeps kicking me. “You are in your room and you are safe. I’m here to help you. Stop kicking me.”

Megan doesn’t respond and kicks my shoulder. I pick her up and place her on her bed as gently as I can. She slaps me on my mouth.

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” she screams at me.

“Why?” I ask her.

“Shut up!” she screams at the top of her lungs. She thrashes around on her bed, pulling at her hair and trying to take off her clothes.

“Are the Tristens here?” I ask her, grabbing her hands.

“Shut up!”

“They are, aren’t they? Where are they? I don’t see them.”

Megan breaks away from me and whimpers slightly.

“Shut up,” she says quietly.

“They’re not actually here, Megan,” I say to her, standing over her. She curls her legs up to her chest.

“They are. You better be quiet.”

“Why?”

“Cause if you don’t, I have to kill you.” She looks up at me, blinks once, and looks away.

“You wouldn’t hurt me, Megan,” I say, sitting down and trying to get her to look at me by tilting her chin towards me. She growls and slaps my hand away.

“I would,” she says, and begins to thrash around again. I stand up.

“Who is telling you that you have to kill me?” I say, as she slams her head up and down against her pillow. I grab her head to stop her and she screams.

“Me! I say!” she hollers.

“You don’t want to hurt me. Stop lying.”

She stops. She turns to me and opens her eyes wide.

“How do you know,” she says, monotone.

“Because I know you. And you told me about the Tristens. You know they are hallucinations and you know they come from your schizophrenia.”

She stares at me, breathing heavily and looking confused. “What’s schizophrenia?”

She jumps up from her bed suddenly, catching me off guard. She manages to escape from her room. I follow her as she runs into her sister’s room, lifts a lampshade off a lamp that’s on Mollie’s dresser and hurls it at me. I deflect and it crashes into the crib.

“Megan! Stop it!” She doesn’t. She throws dolls and blocks and other toys at me.

I grab her and carry her, over my shoulder, downstairs, as she kicked and punched and screams at me the whole way down. I carry her through the hallway and into the kitchen and I grab my cell phone from my bag. She slams her fist into my skull.

I wince and breathe. I dial Kelly's cell phone and ask her if Megan's had her Thorazine yet today.

"No," Kelly responds. "She hasn't for a few days. She keeps throwing it up. Why? What's going on?"

Megan, who's still bent over my shoulder, screams before I can answer. I ignore the agony searing through my head.

"That may be the cause of why she's acting like this. She needs to be on the medicine constantly; she can't miss any doses," I say, taking another blow to the side of my face. "Hang on," I say to Kelly, dropping my phone onto the counter. It falls to the floor and I hear it smash.

I put Megan down and she crawls on the floor, belly down. My phone's screen is broken and Kelly and I got disconnected. I press the redial button and luckily, it connects.

"I'm going to call an ambulance, Kelly, okay?" I say to her. "She needs to be restrained and sedated and I can't drive her there myself."

"Oh, God," Kelly says. I hear her let out a deep breath. "Okay. I'll call Tom and we'll meet you there. I'll be there first."

"My phone may not work," I say. "I dropped it. But I will try to call you back once we get there."

An hour later, Kelly, Tom and I are finally together at the hospital. Tom had to bring Mollie, so a nurse takes her to the pediatric unit where she can be taken care of while we deal with Megan's situation. When Megan and I'd arrived at the hospital in

the ambulance, two male ER doctors strapped her down as I explained her illness, her medications, and how she's been the past few days. They thanked me and took her away. I wanted to go with her, hated to hear her screams as they wheeled her down the hallway. But she is in their care for now. I just have to wait.

I try and comfort Tom and Kelly; I tell them she'll probably be sent to the psychiatric wing for the night and she'll be released tomorrow. Medicine will help. I'm not sure if they believe me, but they both nod. Kelly hugs me.

Shortly thereafter, we are called up to the psychiatric unit. Megan is in a room and asleep. The intake psychiatrist tells us the same thing I told the Coopers earlier; we just have to wait and Megan will be here at least overnight.

After awhile, we have to leave; the Coopers need to bring Mollie home and we're not allowed to see Megan for the rest of the night. She is still sleeping and the doctor wants to keep her that way. He tells us all to come back at 8 a.m. Dumbfounded by everything that's going on, Tom says he'll call me in the morning and I say okay. Everyone is tired; everyone is worried. Just before I drive away from the hospital, I watch, through my rearview mirror, Tom and Kelly strap Mollie in and then hug each other tightly.

On my way home, I sit in silence. I swallow two Klonopins dry, nearly choking on them as they inch their way down my throat. Halfway there, I change my course and drive to work. I hurry to my office, close the door and sit at my desk. I just don't feel like going home; I'd be completely left alone with my thoughts there. Here, I can at least work. On what, I don't know, but I need to not think about Megan, as there's

absolutely nothing I can do now. I need to pull myself together before I pick up Alex later.

I pull some case files out of my desk. I look at the notes that I'd written for Brian. I look at the notes for Julia. I try to think of new ways for them to combat their illnesses but what I'm doing now with them is really all I can. I can't just automatically make them feel better. I need to just keep doing what I'm doing – prescribing them their medications and giving them a safe and secure place to talk. Right now, all I can do is wait for a breakthrough. Brian and Julia need to keep on pushing on for now; it's all they can do.

It's all the Coopers can do now, too. I'm sure they are overwhelmed with worries, and are distraught and scared, but they've been through this before and I see their strength when they're together. Kelly may suffer from anxiety but she certainly seemed strong at the hospital today. Despite everything that was going on, she seemed more put together than I've ever seen her. She looked determined. I think it's Tom that helps get her through.

I put the files back in my desk and stand to look out my window. I feel helpless but I know that I also need to keep fighting for these people—for Megan, for Tom and Kelly, for Brian, for Julia, for Chelsie and for my parents, and for all of the mentally ill patients I've helped treat over the years. What else can I do?

I also need to fight for Alex. And for Lillian. I need to do that for me. I've worked so hard over the years and though I am extremely proud of everything I've done, I've spent so much of my life looking out for others, rather than myself, rather than my family and friends. I owe it to them to work out my own mental issues. I have

such little time left with Lillian and all my time with Alex is precious, especially at his age. I want to be strong for them.

I look at a calendar on the wall across from my desk. Tomorrow is Friday. I'm going to need to cancel my first therapy appointment. But I'll reschedule. I hope that, whenever I meet her, my new therapist will fight for me. Either way, I'll never stop working towards treatments for mental illness and hopefully, some solutions, as well.

THESIS ESSAY

There are often many reasons why a graduate student in Creative Writing wants to go for the MFA: the experience, the workshops, writing stories, the professors. I went to graduate school for those reasons, too, but more than anything, I went because I wanted to write a novel and I wanted the proper training for it. Reading novels, especially as a teenager, oftentimes provided a way for me to be able to deal with difficult situations, such as the bullying I endured through fifth grade until college. I've always been able to imagine myself in so many different characters' lives, even if I didn't completely understand or fully relate to them. While reading, I could become engrossed in another world and also, put aside my own life during that time. So, I told myself over and over that, someday, I would be able to do the same for my readers; I knew that I could help those teenagers who were also bullied and couldn't find a way out, even if just for a night, lying in bed, reading my books, they could pull through.

Like many writers, I've been reading almost my entire life; I read my first book at age four, *Patty for President*, by Jean Davis Callaghan. I didn't, of course, know what any of the terms meant at the time, but I fell in love with the characterization of the two protagonists, the plot, and the positive outcome following the conflicts and struggles the characters endured. This love of reading progressed into a love of writing and I began to write my own stories later on, in my pre-teenage years. I liked how I could take what "real life" was giving me and turn it into something better. For instance, when I was quite young, I didn't know that the romantic feelings I had for a classmate were mutual,

but I could write a story of mutual attraction. I could change what I looked like – just a bit – and give “myself” the confidence that I didn’t have then. Writing turned into another way for me to deal with the tribulations I faced in my life; I could work out my problems in my stories, whether I wrote nonfiction, fiction, or poetry. I could right the wrongs that I was dealing with, even if I wasn’t the character or characters I wrote about. Even though I was bullied in high school to the point where I had to change schools, writing was one of the ways I coped with during that extremely difficult time. I couldn’t do much to stop the bullying in school, but my characters could. They always knew what to say; they were always brave enough, and strong enough, to deal with those who mocked them, threw pens at them in the hallways, and laughed at them for the way they look.

So, when high school came along, I excelled in creative writing. It was the first time I’d ever shown my work to anyone and when my creative writing teacher told me during my senior year that I had talent, I knew even more that writing was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I double-majored in English (with a creative writing emphasis) and Communications. I began writing for the college newspaper, and became Editor-in-Chief within a year. I still loved the writing and editing, but I really enjoyed the management aspect of my position, as well, and so I convinced myself that a career in news would allow me to do all three. While that was sometimes the case, during my three years working for major television networks, I didn’t allow myself the minimal time I had outside of work to write creatively. I took the first major chance I’ve ever been given and moved to Florida to study Creative Writing and obtain my MFA at Florida Atlantic University. It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.

During my time at FAU, I've learned more about writing than I ever really expected to. I knew, coming into the program, that the Creative Writing program was split almost evenly when it came to literature and creative writing classes (excluding composition theory classes and thesis hours) but the graduate school level of teaching I received far surpassed my expectations. Alongside the many other professors that I have had the privilege of working with, I studied extensively with a well-known William Faulkner scholar, Dr. Taylor Hagood, a highly respected Dr. with numerous publications, Dr. Barclay Barrios, and with almost every Creative Writing Dr. in the program, all of whom excel in what they do in the academic world: their styles of teaching, their own prose or poetry, and their mentoring. Outside of the Creative Writing Department, I was also able to work with Dr. Thomas Atkins in the Theater Department, and with Dr. Alan Berger, an eminent scholar who works in the Jewish Studies Department. I know how lucky I am that I chose Florida Atlantic University to attend, mainly because of these professors and what they've taught me about myself and about my writing.

In all of the literature classes that I've taken, the one I believe I learned the most from was Dr. Hagood's class, Disability Studies & American Literature, because I read novels and short stories not only about characters with physical disabilities, but also those with cognitive disabilities, like Benjy Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Also, for my final paper of the semester, I wrote a creative piece revolving around the characters from Katherine Dunn's novel, *Geek Love*. I wrote from most of the characters' perspectives, all of who have disabilities and deformities. That project and the class, itself, showed me how to write from the perspective of characters with mental illnesses and other disabilities.

When it came to the creative writing aspect of the program, I took advantage of every class I could, in terms of different genres. I've never taken a poetry or screenwriting class before coming to FAU, so I made sure that I did so, given the opportunities. During Poetry Workshop with Dr. McKay, I learned about fluidity on a sentence level. My sentences are often choppy in form and I learned how to better narrate my prose through studying poetry because I took that fluidity to it. I took Dramatic Writing with Dr. Atkins as many times as I could (I took Dramatic Writing I twice and Dramatic Writing II once). I have always loved dialogue and have always felt that dialogue, in prose, is one of the best ways to develop the story and the characters; you can "show" and "tell" at the same time; in writing for the stage, all I did was write dialogue. (Dr. Atkins emphasized not to write stage directions as the dialogue should do all the work.) My characters' development and dialogue, in both stage writing and in prose, greatly improved because I delivered a complete piece of work solely through my characters' words. At the end of each semester, the graduate students in the Theater Department put on a showcase and act out all our plays. It was incredibly helpful to see my work delivered by others; I witnessed my work showcased through others, and therefore, I watched my characters develop in ways I never saw before. At the end of each showcase, the audience gives the class feedback on the plays and the writers aren't allowed to talk. It is a great way of receiving feedback; I've never had that before and I highly recommend all writers try it.

I've taken two classes with Dr. Schmitt, Nonfiction Forms and Genres, and Creative Nonfiction Workshop. In Nonfiction Genres and Forms, I was able to produce many different pieces of nonfiction work that I've never tried before, such as the

memoir and literary journalism; the two of those were my favorite forms. With the memoir, I was able to share stories about my bullying and a family member's health issues with my peers and also, get valuable feedback from them in order how to better tell those stories. Among other things, I learned how to characterize those written in my work more effectively, and also, how to tell my story in an order (in a specific structure) that is more appealing and compelling to the reader, something I've always struggled with in all my writing. I also enjoyed the literary journalism aspect of the course, since I worked with such a different journalism form in my years working on the college newspaper and in the television news business. In literary journalism, you can develop characters more, and you can work more extensively with plot and background. In the Creative Nonfiction Workshop I took the following semester, I worked exclusively with the memoir form; I expanded and developed some of work I did in Nonfiction Genres and Forms and I wrote new pieces to fit into the overall memoir I plan to finish post-graduation. I fell in love with creative nonfiction so much that I strongly considered changing my focus to it, but in the end, I felt that I needed more feedback and more mentoring in my fiction, as there were many aspects I still needed to work out.

I've taken Fiction Workshop three times since I've been at FAU, twice with Dr. Bucak and once with Dr. Schwartz. During my first semester, I took Dr. Bucak's class, and frankly, I felt out of place with the second- and third-year students I attended the class with. Many of them were already having their theses workshopped, while I hadn't taken a writing class in three years. I was rusty in my character development and in my narration. I needed work on my dialogue and plot development. My characterization skills improved the most during that class; the stories I wrote ranged from seven pages

to twenty-six, and I noticed how much stronger the characters I created were; my classmates and Dr. Bucak praised the strength of my character development by the end of the semester.

I took Dr. Schwartz's workshop the following semester and I focused on writing from different perspectives. In the past, I'd only written from a female perspective and by the end of the semester, I'd written a story from an adult male rapist's point of view and I also wrote one from a young boy's perspective. I'd thought I would struggle so much with trying to understand the male mindset in these very different characters and stories, but the feedback I received from Dr. Schwartz and my peers proved that the risks I took really paid off; I am now confident in my ability to write outside my comfort zone, especially in terms of narration. I researched character traits similar to each subject while writing each piece and that research helped me feel more confident in properly being able to betray someone even I often had trouble understanding.

My very last class at FAU was again with Dr. Bucak, in her Fiction Workshop. In the eight semesters I took at FAU, that class is the only one in which I'd been able to work on my thesis. My thesis chair, Dr. Furman, has given me helpful critical feedback in terms of my drafts, and the additional feedback from the workshop has helped me more clearly see the flaws I likely wouldn't have noticed so evidently, had I not been lucky enough to have it workshopped and critiqued. Before my thesis, I had never written anything over thirty pages, so the critiques on my much longer novel were very different; both Dr. Furman and my workshop peers and Dr. helped me to see where certain storylines were lacking, and where certain characters and plotlines weren't

developed enough. With their feedback, I was able to better my work in those areas and also to expand my thesis in places where I felt stuck.

I never had the chance to take a class with Dr. Furman, as classes I needed to take at the time conflicted with his workshop, but I jumped on the opportunity to have him as my thesis chair, partly because he was the only Creative Writing teacher I hadn't worked with. Also, his novel, *Alligators May Be Present*, reminds me in some ways of my thesis, especially in terms of his main protagonist, Matt Glassman, and mine, Lisa James. Though the storylines are very different, Matt and Lisa are similar in that they try to build stronger relationships with others, family members and otherwise; the pressures that they deal with in their lives make them do so. I knew early on that Lisa was going to be troubled because of her job, her clients, and also because of the impending death of her coworker and mentor, Lillian, and this reminded me a bit of Matt and his relationship with his grandmother. I knew Dr. Furman would be able to understand my character's internal and external struggles and he's really helped me develop her through his suggestions.

I decided to write *Progress, Regress* through Lisa's perspective because I have always been passionate about psychology, especially mental health. Along with being a published author, my long-term career goal is to pursue both education and a career in the mental health field. As with much of the fictional work I've produced while studying at FAU, I wanted to write a story that revolves around a world that I am not fully familiar with; I am not a mother, I am not a mother of a schizophrenic child, nor am I a schizophrenic, or a doctor who treats the mentally ill. Outside of the books I have read for class during my studies at FAU, I have mainly read books regarding mental

illness, both in fiction and nonfiction. Two books that I've primarily worked with and have inspired my work are Michael Schofield's *January First* and Lauren Slater's *Welcome to my Country*. Schofield's memoir is about his struggles and triumphs coping with his young daughter's schizophrenia and Slater's memoir reveals how her own mental illnesses would sometimes emerge during her years working as a mental-health psychologist. I have engrossed myself in the world of mental health; I've worked with a mental health professional and have consulted the *DSM-IV: Training Guide for Diagnosis of Childhood Disorders* to make sure that I can fully explain, to the reader, the diagnoses my characters have and also, to learn what professionals do while working with the mentally ill, so that the psychologists in my work, Lisa and Lillian, are characters the reader can trust. I don't expect my readers to understand the complex world of schizophrenia, especially since there are still so many unknowns about the disorder, so to this point, I've done as much research as I can to produce realistic mentally-ill characters.

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