

Prologue

Sex left them exhausted, sweaty, and lying on a bed naked.

They lay in silence for a while, her naturally finding a spot on his chest and he pulling her close.

"It's over, isn't it?" Brittany asked.

Alex Valdez's mind went to the pills in the bathroom, snapping to them almost reflexively. The Cure-Alls. Except that wasn't fair, not to the hours he put into therapy or the wife that now asked her simple question. Her simple want: that she never come home again to find her husband in the midst of ending his life.

None of that was an answer though; the doctor and pills weren't what she cared about.

It's over, isn't it?

"My parents fucked me," he said, smirking.

Brittany said nothing.

"I always think about how they died. Didn't Jesus' Disciples die horrible deaths? Wasn't one of them crucified upside down? Those guys believed in something, whether or not anyone else did. My parents were the same. They believed."

"But you don't?"

Years of therapy and this was what she asked. Years without an incident, and now months with no doctors visits needed—yet it still dwelt in her mind.

"No," he said, telling the truth. His parents had been wrong in their belief and their lives had ended in disaster. His nearly too. "None of it was ever true; it doesn't matter what they believed."

Brittany wrapped her arm around his chest. "You can't forget that, even though you loved them."

"I know." Alex closed his eyes.

No one spoke and he began to doze.

"There's nothing lingering, right?" She rose from his chest, balancing herself on her elbow and looked down at him. "What you told Dr. Nayek and me, that's still the truth?"

Would she always be scared? Was that a symptom of finding your house destroyed and your husband with a blade to his wrist? Perhaps that kind of fear never wiped clean, even years after and tens of thousands of dollars spent in therapy—it still stained. Yet here she was, lying next to him. Loving him.

"Yeah, babe, it's still true. You're my life and that's not going to change."

She lay back down, wrapping her arm around him and closing her eyes.

Alex would give her that reassurance from now until death if she needed it. He would continue telling her the truth; they were each other's for eternity. His past was over.

They slept well. Life would be better from here, not perfect—never that, but something they could be content with. They had found a place they both could live in.

Part 1: Doubt

Chapter 1

Fallen

James

He watched the woman push herself up from her desk, wondering if the wooden structure might collapse under her meaty arms and colossal upper body. *On the upside*, James thought, *Samuel Taylor's wife never has to worry about him fucking the secretary during all those late nights.*

The woman waddled back to the closed door behind her; the blinds were shut on the windows beside it. She knocked, waited a few seconds, then opened the door and stepped inside.

James sat in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Washington, D.C. Branch, outside of Samuel Taylor's office. Inside the world of domestic born terrorism, James sat in front of, maybe, the highest office he could hope to—on the east coast, anyway. Taylor was, in practice—if not on paper, responsible for the eastern coast's religious nuts, Native American 'Freedom Fighters', and communists who felt setting bombs off in buildings was a good idea. James Allison received a call at five in the morning, requesting his presence here. He basically said 'yes, sir' and began dressing, because the name Taylor could make you show up at almost any building without asking many questions.

The fat secretary exited the office.

"Head on in, Agent Allison," she said as she walked towards what James felt must be the saddest desk in the world.

James stood, straightened his blazer, and walked toward Samuel Taylor's office.

The lighting was dim, compounded by the closed blinds. Lights ran across the ceiling, but were low, casting shadows. A thin, bald man sat behind a large desk: a closed laptop on top of it, with a few papers to the right and a half full glass of water to the left. Two large leather chairs were in front of the desk, and open space lay behind them.

"Have a seat, please," Taylor said, motioning at the chairs.

James did.

"How are you this morning?" Taylor asked.

"Well, sir."

Taylor looked at him with dark brown eyes that didn't flinch. A few seconds of silence followed before he spoke again.

"Do you know why you're here?"

James understood he had entered an interview. Unofficial and not asked for, but still an interview. He had hoped, in the same way every child hopes to hit a game winning grand slam, that the phone call was about what CNN, FOX, and MSNBC wouldn't take off the television. He knew there was a correlation—an explosion and then being summoned to Taylor's office—but that was all.

"Honestly, sir, the only thing that comes to mind is Mexico City."

Taylor nodded. "Mexico City. What do you know about it?"

James worked D.C. terror cases only; a valuable place to be, no doubt, but also left him knowing very little about happenings in Mexico or any other nation. He saw the news last night and read a few internet articles this morning over coffee, but no more.

"There was an explosion of some kind. I think it happened at a hotel down there. Someone said upwards of two thousand might be dead?" He could have rambled on but closed his mouth instead.

"Maybe two, maybe not. Doesn't matter. We can always count on the news cycle to tell us everything except what matters. In this case, the important part is that we believe an

American caused the explosion. A Mexican-American, but our citizen all the same: Alex Valdez. No word on his body yet, but the likelihood of survival is slim." Taylor stopped speaking and picked up the papers next to his computer, moving them across the table.

James took them. A man smiled at him from the first page. He had dark skin that probably stemmed from his Mexican heritage. His head, like Taylor's, was bald and the glasses he wore made James immediately think of books.

"Not much in those, not nearly the kind of information we need. The Mexican government is going to find out real soon that this guy was American, and when they do, the media is going to make things a lot worse." Taylor's voice never raised, and his hands sat calmly in his lap—acting like none of this affected him in the slightest. "We need to know what happened and why. This Valdez wasn't on anyone's radar, not a single file on a single computer. Then he blows up the largest hotel in Mexico."

Taylor opened the laptop in front of him. "You live with your brother, right, Agent Allison?"

"Yes, sir."

"No children?"

"No, sir."

Taylor nodded as he looked at a screen James couldn't see. "You see a lot of information, already, and you're competent with it. The other thing is you're unknown. Mexico has never heard of an agent named James Allison, and that's important. When they discover this American citizen's involvement, their alert levels are going to rise. That means our agents will be blocked from Mexico, and then information will slow considerably." He closed the computer and looked at James. "That's why I like you for this. You specialize in intelligence, you speak Spanish, and no one knows who you are down there."

Field work. That's what this conversation was about. No more suit and no more desk. No more District of Columbia either, at least for a time. Brandon, though? What about him?

"How long would I be down there?" James asked, knowing Brandon wouldn't be coming.

Taylor nodded. "It will last until we have the information we need or the area becomes too problematic for you to continue."

"I apologize, sir, but I'm a bit confused. Is this a job offer or am I being ordered to Mexico, or neither?"

"This is an offer."

The only issue was Brandon. James would accept without a thought otherwise; you didn't turn down offers given in Samuel Taylor's office. Except there was a child involved, close enough anyway. Brandon, and while their bloodline was of brothers, James—in reality—was more of a father.

"How old is your brother—Brandon?" Taylor asked.

"Sixteen."

Taylor took a sip of his water. "Tough age. Two bedroom condo, right?"

"Yes."

"I almost didn't call you, because of the brother, but here you are—with the offer. I need to know your answer before you leave the room because the plane takes off tonight."

There wasn't time to think or discuss anything with Brandon. Simply time to answer yes or no.

"I accept."

Chapter 2 Falling

Alex

Green sludge sung for his death. Alex Valdez heard the song; he stood, knowing sooner or later the green would touch him. He watched from the door of the hotel lobby, completely empty besides him. The bubbling liquid spouted from the middle of the room, a lowered section with stairs leading a few feet down—chairs and couches decorated the stylish rest area. Alex looked from twenty feet away, in front of a glass entrance that stretched high above him. He couldn't leave by the glass doors though, couldn't move, couldn't flee from the liquid that had already filled the hole in the lobby, drowning both couches and chairs. He could only watch it spread on its way towards him.

"Alllleexxxx," the liquid called. No one person stood behind the words, though. A countless number sang out his name, some whispering and others screaming at a level that should have burnt out vocal chords. All of the voices emanated from the center of the pool, but once in the air, seemed to fly—echoing off the walls and crashing into each other.

Still, the liquid grew.

"Why?" Alex asked the voices howling around his head. "Please..." Snot and tears dripped down his face, but he could no more move to wipe them away than he could run out of the hotel.

"Commmeeee, Alllleexxxx. Commmeeee toooo meeee. Youuurr parreeenntss saaayyyy hellooooo...." The word turned into a burst of wind, blowing into Alex's face. It smelled rotten—meat left in the sun too long, or vomit allowed to fester in a toilet. Alex gagged and the room began to laugh. The speaking stopped and the liquid trembled in humor—but perhaps it was bigger than the pool and the room; maybe all eighteen stories of the building shook in brick bursting laughter aimed at Alex and his clenching stomach.

"Toooo laaatteeee," It hissed. "I'm heeerrrrreee."

Alex blinked and the green slime pulsed at his feet, less than an inch away from his bare toes. He closed his eyes. Looking or not, death was upon him, but the craven inside did not want to witness as it took him.

God, he thought, catching his breath in his throat.

God, It's so cold.

Alex opened his eyes. His head rested on his arm, and looking in front of him he saw a desk. He lifted his head slowly, understanding coming to him at the same pace. He sat in his office chair, not a hotel lobby. He had fallen asleep at his desk. He looked around the room; for other people? For...*something else?*

His face felt swollen. He stood and walked to the cabinet, opening the door which held a mirror. His eyes were red and puffy, his nose still leaked, and his cheeks were wet from both snot and tears. Alex wiped away what he could and went back to his desk—grabbing a tissue to clean the rest.

He didn't remember falling asleep; didn't remember his secretary saying good night. Didn't remember anything but the goddamn dream.

"Jesus Christ," he swore, collapsing into his chair. He tried to think back through the nights of the last month. Had he missed a pill, even one evening? Only the nights all blended, one falling into the next—impossible to distinguish. He had faithfully swallowed a pill every day for two years; missing one wasn't possible.

Then these dreams shouldn't be possible either.

Except here he was, in his office with night surrounding the building and a dream much darker plaguing his mind. He checked his watch, knowing he would have a lot of missed calls. Also, his wife would be near frantic, and her worry wouldn't subside when she heard why he was late. He had to tell her. Nayek too, even if it had been years since his last visit to the good doctor. For two years Alex had lived with this fear. Even though he knew his parents were deranged, had recognized his own delusions, had *moved on*—the fear still lingered. Maybe the peace was only a respite, maybe the drugs wouldn't work forever, maybe it was real after all.

Maybe Alex had lied to everyone.

"No. Not that."

Except the cold inside the dream seemed to persist even now.

Alex stood and walked to his office windows. The cars pass intermittently below as he tried to figure out how to tell Brittany.

The television rambled on silently in front of Brittany Valdez, who paid it no attention. Her cell phone lay on her lap, yet she refused to look at it, because she would only see that more time had ticked away.

Midnight had passed and Alex still wasn't home. Her last six calls had gone to voice mail, so she refused to call anymore either—the phone was only near in case he called her. She would not participate in the idiocy of trying to convince herself nothing was wrong. Her husband should have been home six hours ago or at least called to explain; neither happened and dread had taken hold.

Accident.

Affair.

A third came, very distant in her mind, like someone whispering down a long corridor. All the possibilities that had come to her would be devastating—except, somehow, she feared this one more.

Relapse.

She pushed that whisper away, embracing the other two reasons. A relapse was too much. She didn't want to face the other thoughts, would fight those options with all her being, but she *could* confront them. A relapse, though, a return to life *before* Dr. Nayek seemed unbearable. She had already fought that fight; they both had, and a rematch was...

She sighed, threw her legs onto the couch and laid back. She put the phone on the coffee table next to her. Work would come tomorrow just as it had today, and unless an accident caused this, she would have to go. The hard truth was that the world cared little about death, affairs, or delusions. Brit closed her eyes after five hours of worry; sleep came slowly, but it came.

Alex opened the door and saw his wife's feet hanging off the couch with socks still on. He closed the door gently after he stepped in. He undid his tie and placed it on a chair as he walked to the liquor cabinet. He poured scotch, no ice, and downed it. Then poured another.

Alex looked at Brittany. He looked at her short blonde hair, her high cheekbones, and her full lips. He still thought her beautiful; still surprised she ever agreed to a first date. As he watched her now, six years in and four years married, he wondered if they would survive what he was about to say. They had spoken the vow, *for better or worse*—she to her god and Alex to her. So far it appeared that they both meant the words ferociously. Yet this was unexpected, was

not supposed to happen. He had been cured, been brought back from a precipice; *he had become normal.*

Except you stand here at one in the morning, drinking scotch, and watching your wife sleep on the couch. How normal is that?

He moved to the chair adjacent his wife.

"Brit," he whispered, unsure what else to say. When she didn't move, he spoke louder: "Brittany."

She opened her eyes, turning her head toward the noise. She blinked twice, registering the world. "Where were you?"

He leaned back in the chair and sipped his drink. A quarter million dollars each year and a glass of good scotch whenever he had the urge—none of it meant shit. They said money couldn't buy happiness, and apparently it couldn't fix crazy either. All their money couldn't stop a dream from drastically fucking his life.

"Alex?"

He nodded. "It came again."

Brit's eyelids narrowed. "What did?"

"I dreamed about it again, about the hotel." He took a long sip of the scotch and didn't look up when he finished.

"Hold on. Slow down. What are you saying?" Brittany sat up and leaned forward, her elbows on her knees.

"At my office, I..." his voice cracked. "He told me He was coming." *Like before*, but he didn't let those words outside of his head.

Brittany went to him, taking the glass from his hand and placing it on the coffee table, then sat on his lap. "Have you been taking your medicine?"

He nodded.

"Every day?"

He nodded.

"Tell me what happened." She wrapped her arm around his neck.

"I was there in the lobby, in the hotel—I couldn't move." He looked at the glass of liquor but didn't reach for it. "It screamed for me, just wailing my name over and over. The same green water bubbled from the center of the room; it spread everywhere, trying to get to me.

Brittany leaned in and kissed his cheek, leaving her mouth there, she whispered, "What do you think?"

"I..." Alex paused for a few seconds, still looking anywhere but at his wife. "I don't know."

She nodded, keeping their faces close. "Do you think it was real?"

"No." He held his wife, felt her warmth as he spoke, but was he telling the truth? He answered no to her based on years of programming that showed him the dreams were hallucinations and his parents false prophets. Did he actually think about her question, though? Was it real? He took his medicine every day, but he was dreaming again, just as before...

"It was only a dream, baby, that's all. As long as you know that, we're okay. I'll set up an appointment tomorrow and we'll see Nayek. Just a dream, you understand?"

Alex nodded, and Brit turned so that her legs straddled him. She pulled his chin up, forcing him to face her.

"Just a dream, baby." She kissed him and his hands went to her waist.

Their tongues met, and even during that small intimacy, Alex wondered if her words were true.

Chapter 3

Standing

Brittany

Brittany turned the key inside the lock and pushed on the door. She looked in for only a second before dropping her keys and purse. The couches were splayed open, the stuffing pulled out and strewn around the living room. The material covering the back of one had been slashed so many times it was little more than ribbons. A black X was smeared across the television screen, the cord that should have been stuck in the wall cut in two.

Sweat opened up on Brittany's face and scalp, her heart beat spiking.

No burglar did this but she didn't want to enter. She'd rather walk off a goddamn cliff than go inside her house. Brittany had seen things like this—sure—but never this severe. Never seen knives slash. Never seen drawings on their television. Never seen anything *this* fucked up.

Are you in danger? The question came unbidden.

Does it matter?

She walked in, leaving the keys and purse behind. She moved slowly, trying to come to grips with her house. She could see inside the kitchen from where she stood in the living room—disarray didn't describe it, neither did devastating. Plates on the floor, broken, with blood smearing some, already beginning to dry in other spots. Pans, knives, and silverware were scattered across the floor. The faucet poured water into the sink, flowing over the basin. All the drawers and cabinets stood open and the chairs to the kitchen table were missing. Someone (*your dead husband, darling*) had tipped the table on its side carved words underneath it—although she couldn't read all of it from where she stood.

She could see the word *mine*. Brittany didn't care about the rest; she only wanted to find Alex. She glanced around the living room again, seeing something new. The wall held knives in it. Seven butcher knives, all stabbed hilt deep into the white wall. They formed a smiley face, two knives for the eyes, and a semi-circle below with the other five. Blood dripped down the wall from one of the blades; it would reach the carpet soon (*and that shit won't rinse out, honey*).

Brittany could see a pile of clothes in front of their bedroom door. He was in their room.

Brittany moved down the hall, jogging now. She neared the clothes. Blood soaked through most of what she saw. She held her breath—the shirt could have been dipped in a washing bucket that held blood instead of water.

She stopped. The door to the room stood open and the only light in it came from inside the closet, outlining the closed door.

"Alex?" she called from the bedroom door.

A cry came from the closet—maybe from pain, maybe surprise. Brittany stepped inside, seeing the trail of blood from the clothes for the first time. Her husband was inside. Bleeding—and that became all that mattered. She ran to the closet, opening the door and finding Alex—the back of the closet, clothes pulled from hangers and strewn all around him.

Alex looked down at his left wrist; a knife poked carefully into the flesh and blood forming around the point. Skin stood flayed open on Alex's chest with blood running down to his bare groin. A deep, dark 'X' was carved into his body. The cuts began at his collar bone and traveled down to his ribs on both sides.

Brittany understood that wasn't simply blood; it was life leaving her husband—still pumping, trying to find veins to carry it home, but only finding gashes that forced it into the world. Even if she could get the knife away from his wrist, he would still die if they didn't get to a hospital, bleeding to death in this closet.

"Baby, put it down. Put the knife down." She walked inside, stepping on more clothes stained with blood. Alex looked up, his face dripping sweat.

“He’s here, in the house,” Alex whispered. “He’s come for me now.” Animal like fear radiated from him.

“No, no one’s here. It’s you, just you and me, sweetie. Put the knife down, put it down and I’ll protect you—I swear to fucking God, honey.”

He looked down at his wrist; his right hand tightened on the handle.

Brittany looked at his grip and simply swung her fist, connecting with her husband’s temple. As he fell back, she reached for the knife, grabbing it by the blade, feeling the knife slice through her palm, sinking even deeper as she pulled on it. Alex gave the hilt up and Brittany flung the knife behind her.

She reached for him—both of them bleeding now—and pulled him close anyway.

Alex fell into her as a doll would, nothing holding him back. He wrapped his arms around her waist and tears blossomed.

Kneeling in front, Brittany put her lips to his neck and kissed. “I’m here now. It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay,” she whispered.

Chapter 4

Fallen

James & Brandon

"I'll be fine," Brandon said, pouring milk into a glass.

James didn't want to smile, but the surety of a fifteen-year-old could bring humor to almost any situation. He kept from laughing though, only smiled and watched his brother bite into a grilled cheese.

"Seriously. Think about it. I can drive to school; we only have a few more weeks and I can take the metro whenever I need to go somewhere else. As long as you keep money in my account, I'll be fine."

James hoped that he hadn't fucked up his brother irrevocably yet. Obviously he hadn't taught table manners, as Brandon spoke through a mouthful of bread and cheese.

"What about human contact? You going to be okay living here without anyone to talk to?"

Brandon took another bite. "Don't start thinking you're some kind of great conversationalist. Plus, I *have* friends at school and I'm sure we'll hang out. You're acting like my life depends on you."

James knew Brandon joked. Knew that neither of them would have made it this far without each other's support.

"You're a grown ass man, huh?" James asked, still smiling. He rarely cursed in front of his brother but couldn't stop himself this time.

"Close to it," Brandon responded and washed down a bite with milk.

"What if I'm gone longer than a month? What if I'm gone until deep into summer?" He hoped that wouldn't happen, but he would be down there until told to return—so it needed to be discussed.

"Then I hang out at the house a little more. What's the big deal? Just keep my bank account full and we're fine." Brandon smiled back at him.

"All you need is my money, huh?"

"Yup," Brandon said through his grin. "When do you leave?"

That was the biggest part of the surprise, wasn't it? *This is our goodbye, little brother. Does it feel like I sold you out?* He had agreed to the job before he even talked with Brandon—his last of kin. All the self-confidence Brandon possessed couldn't discount his age of fifteen—in the middle of puberty along with a host of pressures most adolescents never experience.

"I leave tonight. My flight takes off at twelve-oh-five."

"Really?" Brandon asked, holding his sandwich in his hand, which moments before had been on a trajectory toward his mouth.

James nodded. "There's nothing I can do about it. If I go, it has to be tonight. Once I get up from here I have to start packing." He paused, wondering if he should go on. "This will be the last time we see each other for a little while."

Brandon's eyes glistened then. "Can we talk? Like on the phone?"

Don't push him over the edge, goddamnit. Don't make him cry. James had to make him understand, though. He wouldn't lie to him or try and give him false hope. This would be their first separation since Brandon was in elementary school—he needed to understand they would both be alone in a way they hadn't known for a long time. No parents to call, siblings, uncles, aunts—none of that shit. They had each other, and James was taking that away for a while.

"Of course, we can talk everyday if we need. We just won't see each other. You're a tough fucking kid, but you have to understand that. You'll hear my voice, but that's it for a few weeks."