

UPSTAIRS

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For Maria and Heather.

Sometimes we're the only ones who see the ghosts that haunt us.

Your ghosts can't haunt you anymore.

You are missed and will always be loved.

CHAPTER 1

THE EULOGY

"IT'S hard to believe he's gone," I said, looking down at my grandfather's casket. Its ornate gold inlays wrapped around the sides, culminating in a floral pattern over the top where his face was lying, just under the closed lid. His coffin, much like the man himself, was over the top and shouted, *I'm rich*. Which he was. Very.

"I know what you're thinking," I continued, trying to distract myself from the sadness by using humor. "Why is there a picture of me next to the casket? Well, there's not. I was lucky enough that the genetics in our family are pretty strong. I look just like my father and my uncles. And they look just like their dad, my Gramps. We all got his good looks. We look like Xeroxed copies of him, I know. The same dark brown hair and blue eyes. He and I were even the same build for our entire adult lives. As soon as I turned eighteen, he joked I grew six inches and gained fifty pounds to match his height and weight."

He and I had been close my whole life. My parents were mostly absent, traveling on Gramps's dime for most of my child-

hood and adulthood. For most of my life, I spent the majority of my holidays, birthdays, school vacations, and breaks with Gramps. I had my own room in his house until I was old enough to have my own place, though I'm sure my blanket and pillow were still tucked away in a closet somewhere, just in case I turned up to spend an evening. While I still spent plenty of time with him, I hadn't had a sleepover at his house since around the time I met my wife. I suppose on some level I replaced spending time with Gramps with spending time with Courtney. That's normal, right? New relationships tend to replace current relationships, even if you don't mean them to.

I brushed a tear away from my eye and did my best to continue on with the eulogy.

"He was Gramps to me, and most of you know that already. But for those of you who don't, William Henry Washington was my grandfather. The greatest, most wonderful man I've ever known." I intentionally didn't make eye contact with my father because I knew he'd make a face or scoff. Despite Gramps raising my father—with lots of help from my grandmother, who had passed when I was too little to get to know her—they were nothing alike. Where my grandfather was kind and warm and compassionate, my father was cold and hard and often cruel. I had always wondered whether he got that behavior from my grandmother or from somewhere else. But the two men were nothing alike. I think that's what drew me to Gramps so much. And also because I didn't have much choice. My parents would leave me at Gramps's house at the drop of a hat. Some urgent trip they had to take. They always made it seem like it was a business trip, but neither of my parents worked when I was growing up. They never openly admitted it, but they mooched off of Gramps's money. I don't know what the arrangement was,

but Gramps either had a trust for my father or gave him some sort of allowance. Whatever the arrangement was, my parents were gone more often than they were home. Did it bother me when I was a little boy? Sure. Why wouldn't it? But as I grew older—into my teens and early twenties—it bothered me less and less. After all, who wouldn't want to spend time with someone as kind as Gramps? Who wouldn't want to run around, playing in a house so big that you couldn't even see every room and explore every nook and cranny in a single day?

"When Gramps got sick, I think I, like most of you, probably didn't want to believe it. People get old, they get sick, but Gramps seemed like he'd live forever. He was strong and able-bodied right until the end." I saw heads nodding in the crowd as I did my best to look up from the pulpit throughout my speech. *Don't want to be like Ross Geller reading his notes for class*, I thought. I made myself chuckle unintentionally.

"He was made of stone and concrete, wasn't he? I couldn't accept it when he got sick, and I am still processing it now that we're here. I still feel a tingle in my stomach when I think of my phone ringing and seeing Geoffrey's name pop up. The only other time Geoffrey had called me was when Gramps fell and hurt his knee a few years back. So, obviously I knew it wasn't going to be good news." Geoffrey was Gramps's best friend and personal assistant. I think I was around five or six the first time I remember meeting him. Sometime in the early '90s, and given how Geoffrey was always tending to Gramps's needs, I recall joking about how he was like Geoffrey from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. He did *not* like being referred to as a butler, but a lot of what he did was similar, and I always loved a good reference to pop culture.

"I know you all loved Gramps in a way unique to you and

him. I'm sure that , like me, you felt like you were the only person in the entire world when you were with him. He had a way about him. He made you feel special, no matter what." I heard my father clear his throat. Likely to avoid a laugh or bursting out yelling. I ignored it as best I could, but I think I shot a look at him.

"As we lay him to rest today, please do your best not to be sad. Gramps wouldn't have wanted that. He wouldn't have wanted a room full of his closest loved ones crying their eyes out, talking about how much they miss him. And I know. I know how that sounds. Everyone says that at a funeral, right? But I mean it. Let's celebrate Gramps's life today. Let's celebrate his creations. Let's play the video games he created and reflect on the things he did in his incredible life. Let's not focus on the end of his life, but on the journey he took to get there."

It's hard to say goodbye to someone you loved so deeply. Someone who took care of you for years and years, never once asking for any sort of thank you or payback. Never once complaining. Never once saying no when my parents would ask if I could come stay with him for a weekend, a week, a month. It's hard to say goodbye at all, but especially so with someone like Gramps. Someone who was my entire world. Someone who took care of me better than anyone else I've ever known. Even my wife. But please don't tell her that.

"As we celebrate him today, please remember the great things about him. Remember his laugh. Remember the same cologne he'd worn since before I was born. Remember the games he created. Remember the times you spent with him. But most of all, remember him, the man. Remember Gramps for the amazing person he was and for all the wonderful memories he gave you."

I folded my speech up and tucked it into the pocket of my suit. The same suit he'd bought me for my wedding. The only suit I owned. It slid into the pocket right behind the folded piece of paper that had my wedding vows on it, chock full of pop culture references, just like I'd always done. Those were the only two speeches I'd ever had to give in my life, so it was fitting that they stayed together in the pocket of my only formal attire.

CHAPTER 2

THE LAWYER'S NEWS

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT," I said aloud, mostly to myself. It's all I'd thought about for weeks leading up to when my wife, Courtney, and I met with the lawyer of Gramps's estate.

"It's true," he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. No matter how many times I kept repeating that I couldn't believe it, he kept telling me it was true. Over and over again, on an endless loop.

"Okay," Courtney said. "I think he's telling the truth." She squeezed my arm firmly, but not to hurt me. Just to get me to snap out of the state I was in.

We sat across from the largest wooden desk I'd ever seen in my life. Attorney Statler sat across from us, his eyes darting back and forth between his laptop screen and us. No matter how many times he said it out loud, I was still in shock and somewhat in awe. My Grandfather and I had always been close. Ever since I was a little kid, I'd spent weeks at a time with him and his second wife over summer vacation, while my parents went off on trips around the world. Gramps—which is what he'd

always insisted I called him—had remarried before I was old enough to even know that the woman I'd called Grandma wasn't my father's mother. It wasn't until I was in my early teens that my father corrected me, kind of rudely, as it were.

Even into adulthood, Gramps had been there for me. I'd always known he had money from the way he lived. And though I'm not a hundred percent positive, I'm fairly sure that he funded all of those lavish vacations my parents took when I was young. I never knew why, but in my gut I sensed he was the one who took care of those things. And knowing how easy-going he was, he probably did so with no questions asked.

He had everything I ever wanted at his house. Toys as far as the eye could see. Televisions the size of movie theaters, which when I was a kid, was a feat in and of itself. His back lawn rivaled Central Park. I could run for what felt like days and never run out of lawn. I had this amazing box kite he bought me when I was six that I flew constantly out in that yard, while he sat in his Adirondack chair, at the top of the cement steps, watching down on me. Once I got old enough to know what a butler was, I'd realized that the man who occasionally brought Gramps beverages was one. Never alcohol, to my knowledge. Usually an iced tea, or Gramps's favorite, an Arnold Palmer. Always in a little glass. Always with one of those big, square ice cubes you see on television, or in the movies. An ice cube that was so big it didn't feel real.

Call me naïve. Call me childish. I don't know what you need to call me. But I had never even thought about how my college tuition was paid for. I'd assumed that was my parents. That whatever thing Gramps had done for work to earn his money, that my dad had gone into the same business, because it seemed like we also had money.

Besides the trips my parents went on—now that I'm actively thinking back on my childhood, I think they went on six or seven trips a year, sometimes for weeks at a time—we had a big house in a nice neighborhood. I had everything I'd ever wanted as a kid, too. In the mid-eighties, when Nintendos came to the US, I had one right away. And I had all the games, all the accessories—the extra controllers, too. You know the one I'm talking about. With the turbo buttons and the giant joystick. The controller that was so big you had to rest it on your lap. I had that. But, as silly as it may seem, I think the thing that made me really know we had money, the thing none of my friends seemed to have had, was a television in my bedroom. Before that was a thing. Back when cable had only a handful of channels. Jesus, I feel old just writing that down.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Kids shouldn't have televisions in their bedrooms until they're old enough to be responsible. Was that close to what you were thinking? And, like I said, I know that's a silly thing. But when I was really young, I didn't know a single other kid who had one in their bedroom. Just me. And I had the accompanying VCR to watch any movie I wanted from a collection the size of a Blockbuster that lived downstairs in our family room. I suppose that's another sign of our having money. We had a family room, a living room, and a den in our house. Two of those three rooms, however, hardly got used. They were more for show. When my parents would have a dinner party with their friends, they'd often walk through one of those rooms to show their friends some new piece of artwork they'd gotten, or a new couch or something. Anything to brag about, come to think of it. My dad would do that thing he did, where he'd interrupt my mother—mid-sentence—and finish the story, as if he'd been telling it the whole time.

Often during those parties, I'd be at Gramps's house. A house that, as of recently, was mine.

Gramps hadn't been sick, which I think is why I was still mostly in shock about what Attorney Statler had told Courtney and I. He was fine when I saw him for our regular Sunday dinner. A tradition that had been in place since I could remember, likely even before I was born. As a child, my parents would take me to Gramps's house for dinner every Sunday afternoon. They'd spend the day catching up on the events of the week, culminating in a dinner that could rival the Royal Family's evening meals. Course after course of appetizers, entrees, desserts. Food as far as the eye could see. Far more than any four adults and one child could ever need or want. But, like clockwork, we did it every Sunday.

We'd ended that Sunday evening like every other. Gramps said goodbye to my parents, who I generally only saw at these dinners at Gramps's and nowhere else, and, like always, he'd ask Court and me to hang back a minute. That he had something he wanted to talk to us about in private. It sort of became a running joke, because it was always something he needed to talk to us about in private.

He said the same goodbye he'd always said. "You're too good for Max, Courtney." It was their little running joke that I wasn't good enough for her. Which, somewhere deep down inside, I think I knew. At least on some level.

"Oh, shush, you," she'd said, kissing him on the cheek.

"I love you, Gramps," I'd say, as we made our way out the door.

"I love you, too, bud." Bud was the only nickname he'd ever given me and one he called me almost every time I saw him. Ever since I could remember, anyway.

And then we were off. We headed back to our apartment in the city, which Gramps had generously given us a good portion of money for the down payment for. It'd seemed like everything was fine.

And then the next morning, he was gone. He'd passed in his sleep, completely unexpectedly. I couldn't believe it when I got a call from Geoffrey the next morning. It seemed so strange that something could have happened so quickly in the course of just twelve or so hours.

But Gramps was gone. And he'd chosen me to leave his house to. Well, let me back up a second and call out two points. The first being that it was more of an estate than a house. I can't even think of the right words to describe it to you. But it was enormous. In my entire childhood of running around exploring, I don't think I'd ever even seen all the rooms. And the second point was that I was his only grandchild. His second wife had grandchildren of her own, but they never spent much time with Gramps. I doubt I could even pick them out of a lineup. So, I suppose on some level; it was a default decision that Gramps left the house to me.

He could have left it to my parents or one of my uncles, I suppose. But for some reason, he skipped them and left it to me.

"Decades. They built it together. When his grandfather died, he left the whole property and his fortune to Max and his wife."

"Oh my God," I blurted. It hit me like a sledgehammer.

"We think he had been spending a lot of time up there with the trains to feel connected to his recently deceased grandfather," Thomas said a little under his breath.

"I was!" I shouted. "The trains and town we built made me feel like Gramps was there with me! It made me feel him!"

"Max, did you use this smoke in Chet a lot?" the detective asked.

"Every time I was up there," I said.

"And how often was that?" Doctor Ryder asked.

"I don't know," I said, wracking my brain, trying to remember. "A lot."

The memories all flooded back. The countless days and nights in the attic, building up the town that Gramps and I had started, all while Chet zipped around, making his stops, puffing out his sweet-smelling cinnamon smoke. Drop after drop, I poured into the smokestack every time it ran dry. The hazy fog that had covered Williamston had done something to me. My head throbbed, and my eyes watered.

"What have I done?" I cried out.

"Forensics thinks he spent so much time up there that the hazardous smoke—which they stopped producing this way in the seventies, by the way—poisoned him. I spent some time talking to some folks at Lionel and researched it online quite a bit. It was known to cause hallucinations, which is why they changed the formula. His grandfather must have bought it in bulk way back when, and they'd just never run out of it."

"What?" I called, simply unsure I'd heard him correctly.

"We think the smoke from Chet poisoned you," Detective

Thomas said loudly and clearly. "We think it made you crazy." He twirled his finger around his ear.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Though no one had said it out loud, I pieced everything together quickly. Everyone in that house—Courtney included—had been telling me that there was no monster, and I refused to believe them. I'd seen it. I watched it torment me, and I watched it kill my father. I watched it destroy what was left of him and then laugh at me.

"There was no monster," I said aloud suddenly.

"That's right," Detective Thomas said. "There was no monster. You were hallucinating."

The door to the room flew open, and Courtney came running in, immediately clutching my free side when she got close enough. "I knew I should have been worried about you!" she shouted.

"Courtney, I'm so sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say. "I'm so, so sorry!"

"I know, honey, I know." She clung to my side, squeezing me as if she could erase everything that had happened.

The doctors and the detective took a few steps back, clearly trying to give us privacy.

"There was no monster," I told her quietly, almost in a whisper.

"No, Max. There was. You were the monster."

What she said connected the rest of the dots. All the rage and anger I'd been bottling up against my father for decades of abuse and neglect came out of me. It filled me up until I reached a boiling point and exploded. The hallucinations from the chemical poisoning had simply allowed me to find a way to blame someone else. *Something* else. A monster I'd made up. Gramps had seen something as well and had planted the idea of this

monster in my head. Maybe he was using too much of Chet's smoke, too. Or maybe he'd just gotten old and confused, like everyone said. But he planted the idea of the monster, and the chemical poisoning built the rest of it in my head. It was all in my head.

"It felt so real," I said, sobbing into Courtney's shoulder.

"I'm sure it did," she said, trying to stifle her own crying.

"So I..." I started, not sure I could even say the words. "I killed him?"

"That's what they think," she said. "Your father's neck was broken. They're pretty sure you did it."

"I'm pretty sure I did, too," I said, though I wasn't completely convinced I had it in me.

"Whatever he said to you in the attic must have been the last straw," she said. "You flew into a rage and couldn't control yourself."

"But I'm not a killer," I said. "I could never."

"You would never," she said. "Not when you're yourself. You weren't thinking straight. You were poisoned from all the hours you spent up there inhaling the toxic smoke."

"The more time I spent up there, the worse it got," I said, more of a confirmation of what Courtney had just said, and as a revelation to myself.

"With every breath of the toxic smoke, you became less of you and more of the monster you'd made up," she said, now sitting back and looking me in the eye.

"The stronger the monster became, the less I could control it. Oh God. Does my mother know?"

"She does. She feels terrible. We talked earlier, after Detective Thomas told us their theory. She blames herself."

"Why?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Despite sending you away to Gramps's all the time, it wasn't enough to save you from your father. She said that Bruce was a terrible man, but she couldn't stop loving him. She blames herself for all the abuse that spilled over from her to you, but wouldn't elaborate on any of it."

"So she tried to save me by sending me away? By sending me to Gramps's house?"

"Right," she said. "It wasn't your father who sent you to Gramps's house all those times. It was her."

"She tried to protect me," I mumbled to myself repeatedly.

"She did. She did her best," Courtney said, squeezing me to find some sort of comfort, some sort of relief.

"Courtney," Doctor Horton said. "Why don't we let him rest?"

"Okay," she said, holding up one finger to ask the doctor for another moment. "I'll come see you again as soon as I can," she told me. She kissed me on the cheek and stood up in one motion, making her way toward the door.

Before leaving, she turned back and smiled at me. A look that told me she loved me, she believed in me, and she knew better than to think I'd have done any of it on purpose. It brought tears to my eyes.

And then, just like that, I was alone in the room. Left with my thoughts. Left trying to piece together the events that happened at the top of those attic stairs. The events that happened upstairs. How I went from simply hating my father to ending his life.

CHAPTER 32

IN CONCLUSION

SHE WAS ALREADY WAITING for me when I got to the visitation area. She was dressed in her Sunday best, as they say, seated on the opposite side of the glass that would separate us. As I sat, she reached to pick up the handset of the phone we'd use to talk to one another.

"I'm so sorry, Maxwell. For all of this." It was the first time my mother had apologized. She'd hardly spoken to me throughout the trial. She'd only visited me once while I was going through that whole thing. She'd hardly ever called or texted when I had access to my phone. It felt nice to hear her say that she was sorry. Though I was honestly hoping for a little more than just a blanket apology.

Her voice came through the handset, tinny and faint. The sound of other prisoners easily overpowered my mother's frail voice. The man to my right was talking to his "baby mama," as he put it. They were having some sort of dispute over his paternity. The woman to my left was talking with her lawyer, trying to get a retrial.

By this time, I knew the visitor area all too well. Courtney saw me almost every day for the three years I'd been in prison. Despite the best efforts of my legal team—I know how pretentious that sounds, but Gramps's money was put to good use—to plead insanity, I still had to go to jail for murder. Murder in the second degree, technically. The judge sentenced me to ten years, but said I'd likely get out in five with good behavior. I was being the best I could be. After all, there were no trains in jail to make my brain turn against me.

Mom stared through the thick glass at me, as if she were waiting for me to say something. To forgive her. To let her get peace from the situation. But the truth is, I had already forgiven her. Maybe she just wanted to hear me say it out loud.

"It's okay," I said. "You don't have to apologize."

"I could have protected you," she said.

"You did. You tried."

"I should have tried harder." Tears were flowing gently down her cheeks.

"This isn't your fault," I told her. "This is just a perfect storm of craziness."

"I hate that I knew your father wasn't a good man."

"Me too."

"I hate that I didn't protect you."

"Mom, really. Water under the bridge."

"It's not. You wouldn't be here if I'd just protected you. Like a mother should."

"You tried your best. You sent me to Gramps's house. I know that now. I know how you tried to keep me away from him so I'd be safe."

"I could have done more."

"Be that as it may," I said. "It's all in the past now. I forgive you."

The tension released on her face. The crow's feet and frown lines loosened. I could tell she'd been waiting for me to say those exact words. That I'd forgiven her.

"Are you okay in here?" she asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

"I'm doing the best I can. It's about as bad as you'd think it was." My mind flashed to *My Cousin Vinny*, when they first go to jail after getting arrested and there's yelling and hollering at the "new fish". And then I thought about *The Shawshank Redemption*. I felt a lot like Andy Dufresne over the last three years. Like I didn't belong. Like I had to get out. That on some level I was innocent.

"That's all you can do, really," she said. "Be on your best behavior and get out of this place and back to your life."

"How's Court doing?"

"I've been checking up on her, as has Geoffrey. She seems okay."

"She puts on a good front. Don't let her fool you." I knew that on some level, Courtney was struggling. We'd been so reliant on one another over the years that I knew she had to be struggling as much as I was without her.

"I'll make sure to spend more time with her, Max."

"Thanks, Mom. And thanks for coming to see me. It means a lot that you feel the way you do."

"Of course," she said. "You're my baby and always will be."

* * *

SO MANY DAYS I sat in my cell, reading, writing, thinking. I spent countless nights awake in the dark, listening. Hoping that the monster wouldn't show itself again. Fearful that perhaps, just perhaps, it wasn't the liquid smoke that made me crazy. Worried that I was, in fact, actually crazy. I waited night after night, week after week, year after year, to hear the growls. Waiting to hear it come back, to call to me. To make me hurt someone else. Someone I didn't loathe with every fiber of my being.

During the trial, so many doctors had testified for the state about how the liquid smoke poisoned my mind. We even called one as part of my defense, hoping it'd sway the jury to know that we believed the same thing the state did, but that I wasn't of sound mind when I did what I did.

Jeez, even after all these years, I struggle to write down what I did.

I know what happened. They recreated the scene with court-appointed animation for me to watch it back during the trial. I know what I did.

But I still see it differently. The memory of what I thought had happened was burned so deeply into my brain that I can't shake it.

I still see the monster I created. I still see its ooze. I still see it grabbing my father and melting him, eating him. I know that none of that happened. I've worked through it with my prison-assigned psychiatrist. I've talked it out ad nauseam. I know the truth about what happened. Sometimes when I'm actually able to fall asleep, I can see it how I thought it happened. Like a vivid memory of something that never happened. Almost like I was dreaming of it happening.

Most nights, as I lay awake well after dark, I listened. I

waited and sometimes hoped that I'd hear the monster again. That it would find me in prison and it would tell me that what I thought happened really happened. That I wasn't crazy. I hoped for that bit of peace. That tiny shred of assurance that it wasn't me who did something wrong. That whatever lived upstairs actually existed, and it wasn't just my imagination running wild and making me do unintentionally drug-induced violent things.

Though wish as I might, hoped as I may, no monster ever visited me again. No growls at a distance were heard. No visions of creeping shadows. No hidden things that only I could see. Just me in my cell, waiting for my sentence to be over. For my life to go back to as close to normal as it could. To get home to Courtney and resume our lives.

I worried that my life would never be the same. That thought crossed my mind almost every waking minute of every day. That I'd be labeled a murderer by people who didn't understand what had happened. Sure, I'd made the news. I'd been in the papers and even made the cover of the *National Inquirer* at one point. **Toy Train Drives Man Insane**. They thought they were so clever. And while they told most of the story correctly, no one took it seriously because of the publication it was in.

Courtney had been wonderful and supportive throughout the whole trial. She was there for me every step of the way. She held my hand during the sentencing. She'd coordinated with other friends of ours to be there on a rotating schedule, so I was never alone in the courtroom. She shone in her role as my support system. I'd known for decades that I'd picked the right partner, but this whole situation had really reinforced that knowledge.

I know that when I get out of here, things will be tough. Life won't be the same. I'll have a lot of changes I'll need to make. Of

course, I'll need to find some new, less insanity-inducing, liquid smoke for Chet. I'll have to try harder to be the best person I can be.

Hopefully, I can get out of here sooner than I should. I'm not a bad person. I know that. Therapy has taught me that. I am a good person who made a terrible decision. Did I, though? Did I decide? I don't even know anymore. These are the things I think about as I stay up most of the night, unable to sleep in this hell-hole, while I write, to the best of my recollection, everything that had happened, exactly as I remember it.

I hate knowing that Gramps had the same problem I did, though not to the same extreme. He'd seen the monster himself. Or thought he did, I'm sure. He was convinced it was real, much like I was. He wrote me letters about it. He warned me that people wouldn't believe me. And he was right, with good reason. I hated knowing that he must have felt so alone in his last years. I should have visited him more. I should have spent more time with him. All he had were the trains. And they, like they did to me, made him a little crazy. The only bit of reprieve I have is that he must not have spent as much time up there as I had. He wasn't trying to reconnect with someone like I was. He wasn't trying to feel his Gramps up there. And as such, he didn't get as poisoned as I had. I'm thankful for that. Thankful for that bit of relief, knowing he wasn't as crazed by the whole thing as I was.