

Prologue: Reach for the Stars



When Mom was drinking, I'd wish with all my might that she would stop. But sometimes when she did, it was even worse.

It was only afternoon but of course she was in bed, the curtains pulled as tight as they would go. Our new house on Ramona wasn't like the one on Stardust—it didn't face the sun the same way or the curtains were made of a different fabric or maybe it was both—so making it feel like midnight in there wasn't an option. The best she could hope to recreate was dusk.

I was playing some quiet eight-year-old game in my room when I heard her talking. She didn't have a phone in her bedroom, not that she had any friends she might be chatting with anyway, so I went in to see who she was talking to.

The door was cracked. Mom was lying in her bed, on top of the covers. Her eyes were open and she had both arms outstretched toward the ceiling.

“Grab my hand,” she was saying to the air, her tone desperate. “Come on, I have you. Just grab my hand!”

“Mom, who are you talking to?” I asked, trying to make my voice light.

She turned to me sharply. Her eyes were glazed and almost unrecognizable.

“You can’t see him?” she shouted, as if I were blind or crazy or some combination of the two.

“Who?” I asked. My old friend panic slipped his fingers around my neck and began to softly squeeze.

“ERIN, HE’S RIGHT THERE! GRAB HIM!” She was frantic; adamant.

“There’s no one there, Mom,” I told her.

“YES, THERE IS,” she insisted. “It’s Kelly, he’s here. He’s really here. Grab his hand, Erin. Grab him! Get on the bed. Stand up on it and reach. You can get him, honey, I know you can!”

She was gone and I knew it. I didn’t want to upset her any more than she already was so I did what she asked. I climbed onto her bed and I stretched out my arms as far as I could and I tried to grab Kelly.

“Reach straight up. Yes, right there! You’ve got him now, grab him. Come on, Erin, you can do this!”

Over the next few years, my sister and I would be subjected to this torture over and over. Mom would try to quit drinking dozens of times, each attempt marked by periods of intense hallucinations. And every time, we’d stand on her bed and reach and grasp just like she asked us to, but we could never get our dead brother back for her.