

by WILLOWY WHISPER

BECAUSE

SHE WAS

Mama

She didn't deserve this.

Ben's muscles tensed when he finally opened the door. *This is the last time.* The thought ran through him—but then again, it always did. Who was he fooling? She'd come again—and again he'd open the door, and again the cycle would start over.

"You're high." He shut the door, disgusted at the smell of smoke and drugs that washed over her.

She looked up at him, looking much thinner than the last time he'd seen her. Her greasy hair was parted in the middle, with an inch of dark brown roots clashing with the bleached blond hair. Sagging her shoulders, she dropped her duffel bag to the ground. "You're always judging me."

He breathed a laugh. Right. *He* was always judging her. "What happened, Mama?" He didn't bother hiding the barbed note to his voice. "Your last boyfriend dump you? Or did your landlord kick you out?"

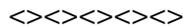
She ignored his stab. "Can I stay here or not?"

Why did it have to be like this? Why was he such a softie? Only he knew why. He knew why she smelled like drugs, and maybe he understood. That's why his door was always open for her—tired of it or not.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, take your stuff upstairs." He paused and looked up and down her. Sadness welled through him, melting away the bitterness for one second. She was wasting away. Killing herself. Eating away her very heart and soul.

But what could he say?

After all, it was all his fault.



He found her up early the next morning, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. She looked better, he thought, with her hair brushed and clean. For a second he could almost see her the way she used to be—smiling, bright, happy.

His stomach churned. Flashes jumped before his eyes—blood, screams, her anguished face. In that one moment, she'd lost every ounce of beauty, every twinkle of happiness.

Ben took another step into the kitchen, pushing away the guilt. Why did she always do this to him? Every time he was learning to forget? She was always there, showing up again, blaming him.

He poured himself some coffee and sat down in front of her. He met her eyes. "Good morning."

She dropped her gaze. "Don't be nice to me."

"Because you don't deserve it?"

Her head snapped up. "No." She had that hateful tone again. "Because *you* don't deserve it."

"I don't want to argue with you—"

"Then stop disrespecting me." She pulled her blanket closer around her shoulders, looking more like a witch from Scooby-Doo than a mother. She narrowed her gaze. "You always do this."

She was right. He did always do this. He always provoked her—maybe because it helped when

she was mad. It was easier to bear when she yelled at him, the same way it had been easier as a child when she'd given him the scars on his back. It had eased the guilt, just a little. Letting her beat him had somehow made him feel as if he were paying for what he'd done, as if he were recompensing for the hurt he'd caused her.

But his debt was never paid—not with her. He wasn't sure if she'd ever quit hurting him.

Ben downed his coffee, then cleared his throat. “How long do you plan on staying?”

She tilted her head to one side, and for a moment closed her eyes.

“Mama?”

“Shut up, Ben.”

His heart slammed in his chest. Anger shot through him, but he quenched it and made his voice softer, “I said how long are you staying?”

“And I said to shut up.”

He sighed. What was the use? Her mind was a mottled mess, and he knew as well as she did that there was no where else for her to go.

He slid out of his chair and was leaving the room when her voice stopped him in his steps...

“Ben?”

Sweet. That was how her voice was. For the slightest moment, without a trace of pain, her voice was soft. Just like it had been before the—

“Where is that brother of yours?” She breathed a laugh, eyes still closed, frail body still wrapped within the blanket. “Tell Cody to come and get his breakfast, will you?”

“Sure, Mama,” he whispered back. If she believed, even for that one moment, that Cody was alive, then he would let her. He couldn't rob her of that.

He couldn't ever rob her of that.

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He was in the shower when he heard the noises. *Sirens?* Surely not...

Grabbing his towel, he dried off and got dressed. As soon as he opened the door, his mother fell into his arms.

“Ben! Help me! You've got to help me!” she screeched, making a fist around his shirt.

Instinctively, his arms went around her. “Police?”

“Yes!” she gulped. “Ben, my son, don't let them take me...”

“Take you?” He stared down at her. There were knocks at the doors. Sirens blaring in his ears. He waited...

Her weary head bobbed up and down. “I didn't do anything. I promise. On Cody's grave, I promise.”

She did it again. Cutting him. Making him bleed. Making him help her...

He pulled her to a closet and shoved her inside. “Stay quiet. I'll make them leave.” He was tired of covering up for her, but he didn't have a choice. They didn't understand why she'd turned to drugs—they hadn't seen her before the accident. He had.

Ben opened the door, running a hand through his wet hair. He tried to look shocked.

“Officer?”

Two men stood rigid. “We've got a warrant for the arrest of Amy Costner.”

“Yeah—that's my mom.” He paused for a mere second. “But you've come to the wrong place.”

She's not here."

The officers glanced at one another, then one of them spoke more firmly, "We know she's here. Her car is in your driveway."

"Yeah." He breathed a laugh. "It's a long story. You see, she actually just sold me that car and I was—"

"I'm sorry, sir. We'll have to search your house."

"No." Ben braced himself in the doorway. "I told you she's not here."

"Then we'd like to see for ourselves."

Maybe they wouldn't look in the closets, but surely they'd see her things...

Ben didn't have time to reason it out. Next thing he knew, he was swinging his fist, throwing an officer back.

The other man charged him, wrestling him into the house, but Ben punched him to the ground, ducking the blows...

Something hard hit over his head, sending him to the floor. Then there were colors in his eyes—an officer pulling him to his feet—dizziness sweeping over him.

The policeman was breathing hard. "You shouldn't have done that, kid."

Ben backed up, keeping his hand on his head. He stared at the two of them, both facing him—then sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Uh huh." The police stepped forward, hand cuffs ready.

"No, please." Ben held up his hands in surrender. "I won't give you anymore trouble. I promise."

He looked skeptical...

"Look, you can arrest me, whatever. But..." the words faltered on his lips. "But let's finish this business about my mama."

The police finally nodded. "You'll spend jail time for those punches, kid."

"Yeah, I know—but what's she done?"

"Drug dealer. She's got a load of cocaine somewhere with her. She's looking at thirty-some years in prison."

No. She used drugs because it made the death easier, it blurred away the pain of that day. He understood that. After what he'd done, he could forgive her for drugs. But she wasn't a drug dealer. Surely she wouldn't do that. Surely not...

"She's got it with her somewhere in this house."

"Not my house." Ben sucked in a breath. How could she do this to him? How could she use him like this?

He swallowed. "Her car. It might be in her car."

"We checked that."

*Thirty years...in prison...*

"She's here, son. We know she's here."

Ben met their gaze. Something stirred within the cage of his chest, but he wasn't sure what it was, and for the first time in years, he wanted to cry, so keen was his disappointment. What kind of woman had she become? Had her grief really taken her *that* far?

"She's here." The words were out before he could stop himself.

The police moved forward, but Ben stopped him.

"Please. Let me have a word with her. Just let me speak to her."

The man hesitated...

"Please."

Finally, he consented.

Without a word, Ben made a beeline for the closet and threw open the door. He swallowed, staring down.

She was gone.



He took the steps two at a time, throwing open her door, stepping inside.

She jumped and stared at him wildly with mascara-muddled eyes.

“Mama, where is it?” He stepped forward, towering over her. “You never told me.”

“Didn't I?” She sat weakly onto her bed, holding her thin arms. “Maybe you didn't ask.”

“But, Mama, the drugs—”

“So what?” She was on her feet, coming towards him. He'd seen her like this before, so many times. Ever since that day, she'd get like this with him. So...angry. So cruel. When he was a child, he used to be afraid of her. Now he only pitied her. Or something like that.

“You know why I do drugs.” She took another step closer to him. “But some people are worse, you know. Some people kill.”

He'd heard it a thousand times, but the words never lost their sting. His eyes teared up. “Mama.” He couldn't get the words out, couldn't dislodge them from his throat. “Mama, you know it was an accident.”

“But you pulled the trigger. You killed your own brother. You killed him!” She stepped closer still, until her thin frame trembled against his and her worn face peered up at him, blood-shot eyes fierce with rage. “I told you not to play with guns. Didn't I tell you? But you didn't care. You were a wicked child—and you're wicked now. You're the reason I do drugs, Ben. You killed Cody. It's all your fault.”

He flinched as if she'd hit him. Her words had hit true—but then again, they always did. She knew how to make his pain worse, but she didn't care. What kind of mother was she?

“Cody is dead.” A quick sob shuttered through her. “You killed my baby boy and I hate you.”

“Mama, don't—”

“I hate you!” She tore away from him, backing into a corner, balling herself into a hunched position.

He followed her. “Mama, I was nine years old. I'm sorry.”

She shut her eyes, tilting her head. Then she started rocking herself, back and forth as if the motion comforted her. “Cody, baby. Cody, my baby...” was her whisper.

Ben stood rigid, pain raking through him. He stood for a long time, just listening, just watching, just wondering what in the world had ever possessed him to play cowboys-and-indians with his father's loaded pistol. It was a question he asked every day of his life, but he never came up with an answer and it only made the pain worse...

“Ben?” Her shrill voice penetrated the room.

He swallowed, bracing himself. “What?”

“Those men—are you going to let them take me?”

*Thirty years. Thirty years in prison.* She didn't deserve that. She wasn't like this—she wasn't meant to be like this. But he had made her like this, and he couldn't let her pay for what he'd caused.

“No, Mama,” came his whisper. “Where’s the drugs?”

“In the duffel bag.” Her eyes were still closed, voice still soft. “All of it’s there and I need it.”

“Sorry.” He reached for the bag and let the weight of it rest in his arms, knowing what it was costing him. “You can’t have this anymore, Mama, alright?”

She just kept humming, eyes tightly shut, rocking herself...

On an impulse, Ben went to her and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She didn’t stir, didn’t even pause her song. But she smiled, and Ben was certain she imagined the kiss was from Cody.

He left the room and found the police waiting for him. He tossed them the bag. “This is what you’re looking for.”

The man unzipped it, then glanced back at him skeptically. “Yeah, it is. Where’s your mom?”

Ben inhaled a breath. “She—she’s upstairs. But it’s not her you want.” So what if he was a liar? It was better than sending her to jail. “It’s me.”

The policemen stared at him, unconvinced.

“I’m telling you the truth. She had nothing to do with it. She might have taken some drugs, but the cocaine in that bag is mine. I’m the man you’ve been looking for.”

“Why are you telling us this?” The policeman’s eyebrows made a V. “You’re trying to say that this Amy woman had nothing to do with it? With this bag?” He lifted it up just slightly.

“I had her bring it to me. She didn’t know what was in it. She’s taken some drugs, but she’d never do anything like this.” Ben held out his wrist. “That’s why I fought you, but I can’t let you arrest her for what I’ve done.”

The cold metal cuffed around his wrist. The policeman stared at him, still in wonderment, half believing. “Guess there’s no more evidence than a confession.” He paused. “But why’d you spill it? You could have gotten away with looking innocent.”

Ben breathed a laugh—a bitter, sickening laugh. *Why?* That was a funny question with but one answer. “Because she’s my mama, that’s all.”

“Right.” The police led him out the door, into the car—and then he was on the road, body being jostled with each bump in the road. He stared out the windows, at the trees zipping by him, the houses, the people.

*Thirty years.* Pain thumped through his chest, but it was pain that he was forced to bear. Maybe he’d lied to those policemen, but in the end it didn’t matter. He was paying for his own crime—not hers. No matter what the police said or thought, no matter what the records showed, he was paying for a nine-year-old’s bloody folly.

Ben squeezed his hands in his lap, the police car taking him closer to a thirty year punishment for a bag of dope that wasn’t even his. He swallowed down the irony of it and remembered one thing:

He wasn’t doing it for Mama.

He was doing it for himself.