

Insanity – Excerpt 1
By Emily Dammer

Prologue

You are the only one I can tell this story to. The story of what happened to me after you were taken. I searched for you for weeks, for months, RJ. But you were gone, vanished into thin air.

They found me when I had given up. When I had lost all hope that you were still out there, somewhere. I was too close, too careless. Without you, the screams returned. I was out of my head afraid without you, RJ.

I tried not to blame you for getting caught. You did it for me. But you left me alone. You know how I get when I'm left alone.

And then I was really alone. Thrown into a cage. A cell. With only the thoughts, the memories of us, *our* memories, to keep me from vanishing away.

Chapter One

Introduction

The creation of the sixth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-6) was a massive undertaking that involved hundreds of people working toward a common goal over a 5-year process. Much thought and deliberation were involved in evaluating the diagnostic criteria, considering the organization of every aspect of the manual, and creating new features believed to be most useful to clinicians. All of these efforts were directed toward the goal of enhancing the clinical usefulness of DSM-6 as a guide in the diagnosis of mental disorders.

I beat my fist in a steady rhythm against the metal door. A deep angry *buh boom, buh boom* that echoed and bounced around my cell. I had stopped screaming days ago, my voice run ragged. Now my hand was swollen and bruised. I was tempted to stop the pounding, but the physical pain felt good. It kept me moving, kept my blood flowing. It was the only way I felt the tiniest bit alive in the dark cell. The only way I could still hear my heart beating.

The cell was too small to walk around in. About the size of a broom closet. And the cold—probably somewhere around twenty degrees—had nearly frozen every muscle and joint in my legs. They were sprawled out under me, my ankles and feet purple and swollen, nearly frostbitten. A flimsy pair of blue nurse’s scrubs and white plastic flip-flops made up my patient uniform, and no amount of tugging or rubbing could cover up my ankles and feet from the cold.

So, I laid there, pounding my fist on the door, hoping someone would hear me. Hoping someone would come to rescue me or at least give me something to eat. And while the rhythm of my fist echoed and rang throughout the cell, the ringing always brought with it your voice. And

from your voice, our memories.

They came in waves, so strong I felt transported back to that time, as if I were really there with you.

All I had to do was listen for your voice and from that voice I imagined your eyes. Your blue as lake eyes, and I was there with you. The soft skin of your palm was against mine as you became real to me, and the rhythm of my fists faded away into the background, *buh boom, buh boom* until they were no longer there. It was just me and you.

“You love me don’t you?” I asked, whispering softly into your ear. My lip caught the corner of your cheek and you turned; your face, every feature lit up by the moon. I couldn’t breathe let alone speak when I saw you standing there. That damn toothy grin of yours with that one crooked tooth that you were always trying to hide with a slight curve of your upper lip. That tiny scar above your right eye from a skiing accident when you were twelve. All things you tried to hide, but imperfections I loved so much about you. They were the little things that made my heart skip a beat every time I saw you.

You leaned in slowly, and our lips were close enough that I could just feel the warmth of your breath as you spoke.

“You know you never have to ask.” I couldn’t bare it any longer and I bridged the gap, feeling your lips stretch across mine. I kept my eyes open, watching your jaw clench and unclench, creating a groove along your cheek. I reached up and smoothed out my hand along the line, your stubble rough and dark.

I drew back quickly, putting space between us.

“You haven’t shaved,” I said, surprised. You looked confused, running your fingers along your jaw. I looked down at your clothes: jeans, combat boots, and a forest green down jacket.

You had on that black beanie, your favorite. I loved the way your dark hair curled out from underneath it.

I had on similar clothes, a wool jacket, jeans, and brown boots. Snow pooled around them, crunching as I stepped back and forth. I looked up for the first time at the pine trees that were covered in a thick layer of white. They created a sort of canopy around us, protecting us from the falling snow. And suddenly, it was all coming back to me then. Where we were. What day it was. Why your jawline and chin were rough with stubble. Why we were dressed and ready it seemed to hike a mountain.

I remembered what day it was. I could never forget. November 23rd, 2023. It was a Friday, a dark, dreary, cold Friday. One of those too cold days, the kind of cold that digs deep into your bones and leaves you ragged. The kind where the wind whips at your face scratching like a cat, and howling like a dog.

“We should keep moving,” you spoke loudly, your voice rising up over the wind. I looked back up into your eyes, the tiny speck of green like a tear around the iris of blue, and I nodded.

We were hiking through the Seney Stretch, and you spotted the tower before I did, do you remember. The teal clock tower, Docker’s candy store; the Delft cinema. We were there. I remembered now.

“Hopefully this place will be safer than the last,” you said, as you reached out a hand to help me over a fallen tree limb. We were nearing the city center and leaving the woods behind. It felt good to walk on something other than roots and frozen mud. My ankles were sore and the sidewalks were calling my name.

You grabbed my hand, moving forward quickly, but I stopped and rooted myself in place.

You turned back, looking anxious and uncertain, but mostly just cold.

“We have to be careful this time. We can’t draw any unwanted attention,” I said. You nodded, and I could just make out your teeth chattering. “Take your hat off.” I gestured at your beanie. You quickly removed it and pointed at mine. It was a pink beanie; one I had stolen way back when I had first left home. I rolled it off slowly, smashing down my hair.

You smiled wide, that damn crooked tooth in full view.

“What?” I asked.

“Your hair,” you laughed, gesturing for me to put the hat back on. I shoved the beanie back on, frowning.

“Your hair probably doesn’t look any better.” But that was a bold faced lie. Your hair was in perfect black ringlets that framed your pretty face. Even when we didn’t try to stick out, your boyish charm always did. No matter how hard you tried to keep your face to the ground, people always stared.

“Do you have the money?” I asked. You pulled out a few crumpled five-dollar bills, money you had found in the pockets of the jacket you had stolen two towns back. We both hated stealing, but it had become a necessity.

“Good. Now, we’ll go into Dockers, get something to eat, then we’ll find a place to sleep. In and out as fast as possible.”

“Dockers?” you asked, stuffing the money back into your pocket.

“It’s the local breakfast place, on the main stretch. It’s fast and cheap.” I only remembered the place from a time a long way back when my father took my brother and me to visit his dying mother. He had hoped bringing us along would soften his mother’s heart, and maybe then she would put my father in her will, but she was just as mean as ever. We left with

empty pockets and bruised wrists.

You nodded and reached out for my hand, more insistent this time. I didn't resist.

Downtown Marquette was exactly as I remembered it. Nothing had changed. The teal clock tower loomed over the tiny town, casting a shadow along the main road. A few people were already awake; store owners and students, walking happily with paper mugs of coffee that steamed up into the air. I wanted to place my hands over top to warm them.

You and I made sure to keep our faces low to the ground as people passed, but as most Yoopers were accustomed to, they said hello in a cheerful upbeat manner. I softly whispered back a hello so as not to seem rude.

Dockers was in the middle of the main stretch and was already busy with the town's small business owners picking up coffee and fresh pastries at the candy counter. A young pudgy kid, maybe around sixteen years old, stood slouched over the podium near the front door. He mumbled something as he handed us two menus.

"Sit wherever you like," he said, gesturing behind him at a dozen tables or so that were jammed into the tiny space. Steam from the kitchen hung in the air as two cooks sweat and bustled around cooking greasy eggs and pancakes.

I hated open concepts like that. I couldn't imagine being watched as I made people their food, my mistakes for the whole world to see. But what really scared me were the amount of people crammed into that tiny space. The tables and chairs were pushed so close together that the people sitting down were nearly back to back and shoulder to shoulder. I felt already as if I couldn't breathe.

But, you had my hand grasped tight, and you gently lead me toward an open table near the back of the crowded room. Some of the tables' occupants looked up as you excused yourself.

They smiled and quickly looked back down at their food. When I did finally look around after taking a seat with my back to the wall, I noticed how tired everyone appeared, sipping their coffee and picking at their pancakes or egg breakfast specials. A random few talked excitedly, some peppy women at a table near the only window. One had her back to us, but the other two were both decked out with dark eye shadow that contrasted their platinum blonde hair, a bold look I never quite understood. They looked young too, but not nearly as young as us. More like twenty-somethings, probably fresh out of Northern Michigan University.

I guessed maybe they owned the few boutique shops around town by the way they were dressed; a plaid poncho over a cashmere grey top on one and a wool sweater on the other that screamed New York fashion week.

The one with the plaid poncho looked up from her egg whites and smiled, an uncomfortable, anxious smile. One someone gave when they were trying to check us over. I didn't like that she was staring, examining us, but I couldn't really blame her. We stuck out like a sore thumb, and I couldn't imagine how horrible we smelled. Two or had it been three weeks hiking in the woods. We probably reeked of body odor and mud.

I stuck out my tongue and wiggled it around. She huffed and nudged her friend. I quickly looked down at my menu and giggled.

"Did you see that? Did you see her? She just..." I could barely hear the woman over the clatter in the kitchen as I pretended to search through my menu. Who knew someone could get so upset over a stuck out tongue. Oh the horror of it! But as I looked over the menu, the breakfast specials caught my eye, and the woman's voice began to fade into the background. An egg sausage sandwich and pumpkin spice pancakes. I hadn't had fresh pancakes in years, and they appeared to be one of the cheapest items on the menu besides a bowl of porridge.

And porridge was the last thing I wanted; tasteless oats, something we had been eating every day for the last week. Hard as brick granola bars that you had stolen from a gas station at the last town we had happened across. Oats were our food staple on our hike to Marquette, and I had almost chipped a tooth on the Quaker oat bars.

“I think I can guess what you’re going to order,” you quipped, peering over your menu. My heart quickened staring into your eyes, those deep as lake eyes.

“Yeah,” I said, dropping my menu closed. “And what would that be?”

You slowly lowered your menu, smiling. “Hmm let me see. I’m going to guess something starchy, something spicy, and something cheap. The pumpkin pancakes.”

I shook my head, giggling. I didn’t want to give you the satisfaction of being right, but you were always right. You could read me like an open book.

Even though you weren’t like me, *gifted, cursed, crazy*, whatever you wanted to call it, you could somehow read people. You could tell exactly what they were thinking just by looking at them. Maybe it was the way you recognized their decision making process. I’m not sure. But you seemed to know exactly what a person was going to do next.

“Nope. The porridge,” I said. I tried to keep a straight face, but that smile of yours, that damn crooked smile. You knew exactly what I was doing, but you just chuckled and didn’t protest. I tried to look past you to get the waiter’s attention, but your gaze kept sucking me back in, and I couldn’t help but poke out a smile every once in a while.

When the waitress finally came over, I let you order. You didn’t try to flirt, but it was in your nature to be kind. And that waitress, it was all she could do not to write down her number right then and there and give it to you. And me, as I watched her cheeks turn red and her eyelashes flutter, I was fuming with jealousy. I had to literally bite my tongue so as not to say

something that would get us kicked out, and I knew how much you wanted to have normal breakfast.

And thankfully, my porridge wasn't half bad. The cook had sprinkled a layer of nutmeg on top and added a cup of warm milk to it to keep it hot and hearty.

I would've preferred the pumpkin pancakes, but the spicy stick-to-your-ribs oats was a nice second choice.

You watched me with tepid satisfaction as you ate your egg sausage sandwich special, humming a little with each bite. The sound of verbal satisfaction with your breakfast choice was probably meant to annoy me, but I wouldn't let it. I had won this one. Or at least that's what I thought.

We ate in silence for a while, basking in the heat humming from a vent above us. I sipped down two cups of coffee drenched in cream, and you closed your eyes a few times with that small smile that you only had when things were perfect, when things couldn't get any better.

"Anything else for the two of you?" the waitress asked, causing us both to jump a little. You had cleared every last morsel and yoke dripping from your plate, but I was still working on mine, the oats beginning to lose their luster after the sixth or seventh squish and swallow in my mouth. But I wasn't giving up.

"We'll take an order of pumpkin pancakes to go," you said quickly. I tried to say something, but the sticky oats kept my mouth glued shut, and even though I tried to get your attention by tapping my hand on the table, you kept your eyes, those dreamy eyes, glued on the waitress and she kept her eyes glued on yours, as if in a trance.

"Coming right up," she chimed as she left to put in the order we didn't need.

I gummed and swallowed the rest of the oats, and I scowled.

“Why did you do that?” I asked, clanging my spoon against the side of my empty bowl.

You smiled wide at me, your crooked tooth in full view now, “Because you want them.”

What I *wanted* was to protest, to argue and fit like a baby, but I just couldn’t, not with the way you were smiling at me, those eyes so devilish, and that perfect jawline. When you looked at me like that, I always surrendered.

We left Dockers full, warm, and happy. Something we weren’t very often.

“How much money do we have left?” I asked glancing down at the doggy bag in your hand.

You rustled in your pockets, bringing out a single five-dollar bill.

“Squatting it is then,” I said, frowning. I pulled my beanie farther down over my forehead, the wind whipping needles across my face. You nodded, but pulled me into a side hug, and I melted into your arms.

It was dark and even colder by the time we found a quiet cul-de-sac. You chose a sweet looking Victorian home with blue shutters and a yellow door. It was something I loved about our nighttime rendezvous. You chose the house you wanted to buy for me, and then we would imagine ourselves living in it. But we would only make it as far as the shed out back or the pole building next door. We barely ever got to go inside our dream homes. And this time wasn’t going to be any different. We were going to sneak about back to a gardening shed. At least it was out of the cold.

“What do you think?” you asked, staring warily at the house.

I squinted, looking up at the windows on the second and third floor. The branches scratched against my bare skin, but I watched, unblinking for a minute or two longer.

No movement, not a shadow or a shudder. The house was empty. Whoever lived there was out for the evening. But we always had to assume that our window of opportunity was short. They could be coming home at any time.

“I think we’re clear,” I said.

You kept quiet, your eyes scanning the street. I followed your gaze until you turned back toward me, a look of uncertainty on your face. A wrinkle formed on your forehead. If I couldn’t sense your fear, it was easy enough to see it across every feature and line on your face. You were more than worried.

“What?” I asked, leaning in closer. The streetlight behind you cast a line of light across one eye and the corner of your mouth. It was pursed tight and your jaw clenched and unclenched.

“Don’t get mad,” you finally said, your voice catching. You cleared your throat, beginning again, slower. “Don’t get mad. You know I wouldn’t ask unless I thought it was absolutely necessary.”

You didn’t have to go on. I knew what you were going to ask. I shook my head and turned away from you. I wouldn’t do it. Not again, not ever. You knew what it cost. Every single time.

“Ellie, I’m tired,” your voice was barely audible, a whisper that was drowned out by the sound of the gusty wind. Guilt spread through me, holding my chest in a vice grip. I knew your words weren’t meant to hurt me or make me feel guilty. You were just stating a fact. We were both tired, physically and emotionally. If it wasn’t for the curb against my hip, I probably would’ve fallen over from exhaustion.

I glanced back in the direction we had walked. Tiny glimmers, small silver sparks across the water of Lake Superior caught my eye. I could just barely make them out against the horizon

from where we sat, but regardless, those tiny flecks of silver seemed to call to me.

That weightless feeling that water allowed, floating in the cool abyss, letting everything else pass away, that was one of the few things I still missed from my past life. Weekly swim meets and daily practices. My mother had forced me onto the swim team kicking and screaming at an early age, but over time I had grown to love the competition, the physical outlet swimming allowed. The anger and fear I felt on land drifted away when I was under water, when I couldn't hear anything but the sound of my own heart.

“Please. There's no one home here, we know that for sure, but we don't know if someone's looking out their window next door, if they'll see us sneaking around.”

I looked over my shoulder at you, your face now fully shrouded in darkness, but I knew you too well. I knew your face, the shape of your nose, and the way your forehead creased when you were in pain. The way you had aged so much since you had found me back at my grandmother's cabin.

I took in a deep breath, choking back the fleeting thought of what you could have done or who you could have been if we had never met that night on Gull Lake. But it was much too late to be having those thoughts now.

I nodded. You grabbed my hand and kissed my palm, pulling me closer to you. Your other hand cupped my face and you kissed me on the cheek.

I tried to smile when you let go of me, but what I was about to do never warranted a smile, so I closed my eyes and took in two deep breaths. In, out. In, out.

The neighborhood was silent.

Until I let go of your hand. Until I let my brother's words of fear grip me, “Go, run, they'll come for you. They'll come for all of us.” Until I let myself finally feel what I had been

masking with love and lust and denial. Until all the fear came crashing down on me, the dam finally lifted.

Until a thunderstorm of screams erupted inside my head threatening to crack open my skull.

My head snapped back. I balled my fists and gritted my teeth. Cries and small unrecognizable noises came through my clenched jaw. You grabbed my hands and said words of kindness to me, but it was all too loud inside my head.

I tried to focus the screams, feel my way through them. I had done it before, but I needed you. I needed to see you. I opened my eyes despite the searing pain behind them, and I found you, your blue as lake eyes. I focused on your eyes and the bridge of your nose and the black ringlets that fell across your forehead.

As I focused on your face, what I could recognize about you, like the tiny scar above your right eye, some of the screams got quieter.

Some got closer, more recognizable. I could make out words and phrases, while others just disappeared altogether.

“At the end of the road, to the left,” I said, pointing straight ahead, my eyes still focused on your scar. “Four maybe, five. I can’t tell. One or two are asleep, I think.” A low howl hissed out through my gritted teeth.

An image of wolves tearing apart a child flashed across my vision. I squeezed my eyes shut again, and the screams came back in full force. I dropped your hand and dug my nails into my palms. I could just barely feel you as you touched my shoulder, rubbing small circles with your fingers. “The others are young children.” My voice was so small.

Your fingers stopped, and with their momentary lapse the screams turned into howling.

Then one single voice rose out above the rest, shrieking and howling as if it was taking its last breath before death.

It was close, so close I could feel the fear tingling across my skin. It ripped away at my gut. It was so feral, so real. There always seemed to be a distinction between a child's fear and an adult's. Adults knew how to handle their fear, years of practice taught them to hide it and deal with it, self-talk and defense mechanisms were used. But children were just starting out. They feared monsters that lived in their closets and death that came from the dark, and knew not how to deal with it in rational ways. So when a child felt fear, I felt it as they did, with pure unadulterated panic and terror.

That howl ripped through me, and all I could do was hold on for dear life.

I couldn't breathe and pain rushed up into my throat. I leaned away from you and threw up into the dirt, which only made things worse as I choked on the thick oatmeal that came up.

"Deep breaths. That's it, that's it. That's all I need to know. Let it pass." I couldn't take deep breaths. All I could do was try to swallow the bile and oats that had come up, and I began to hyperventilate. "Look at me Ellie. Ellie, look at me." You were yelling. Not loud enough to wake anyone up, but just loud enough to get my full attention. I forced myself to stare into your eyes.

"RJ, I'm sorry," I said before the darkness swallowed me and the coldness sucked me back to where I knew I really existed. To where I knew my body was decaying and rotting away.

To the Marquette Asylum. To my cold and lonely cell. I didn't know where you were. You and I had been separated for three years. My only connection to you, the only way I kept my sanity was to dream about you. To dream about our time together. But I feared it wouldn't be long before I forgot you altogether, before you faded away into the recesses of my mind. Before it was just me, alone and afraid inside my cell, inside my mind.