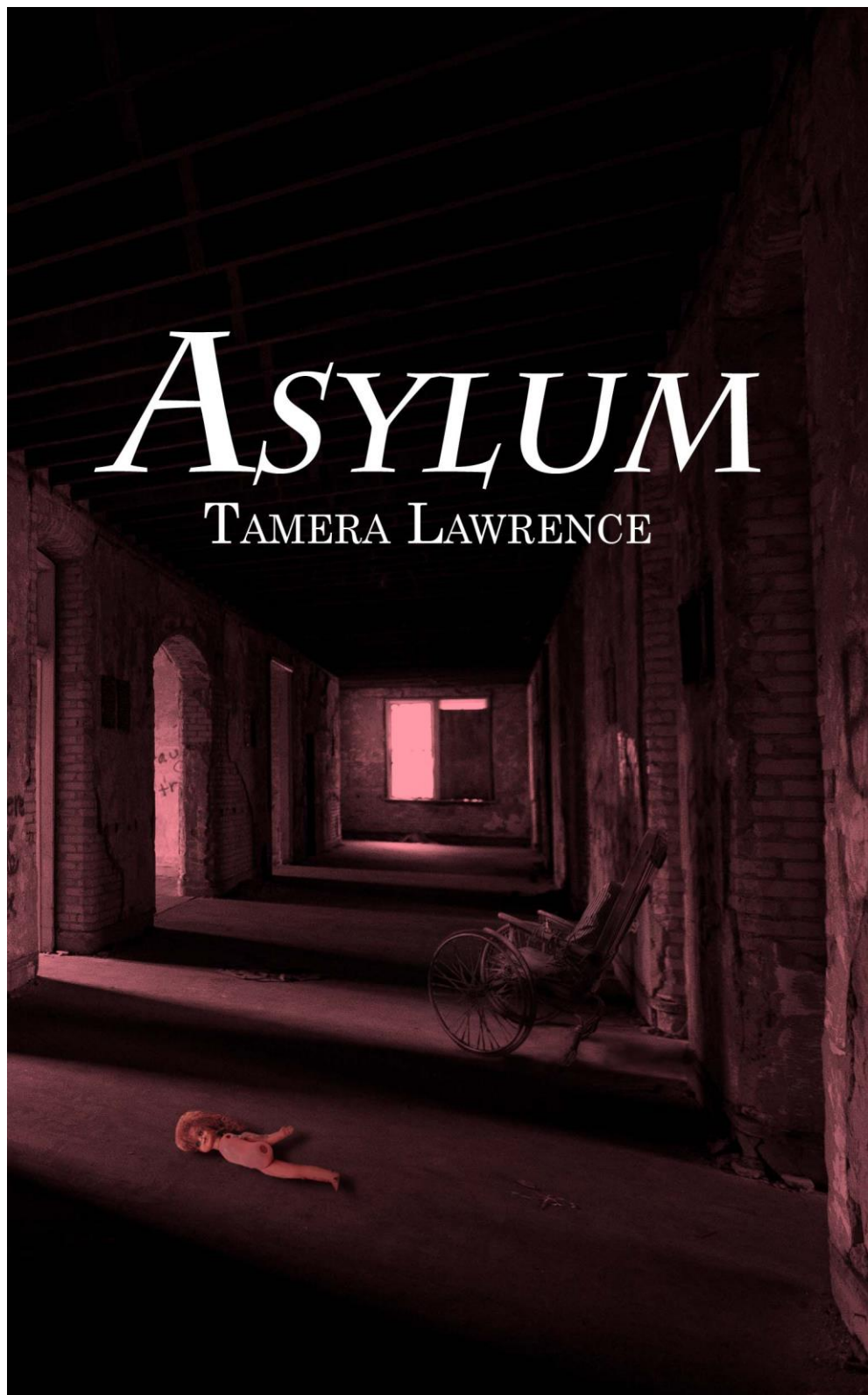


ASYLUM

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PRELUDE

Rose Hill Asylum, Pennsylvania, 1984

Beneath the cover of darkness, Kyle Hampton dove behind a wooden crate. The nine-year-old huddled against the barrier, bracing himself against the balls of his feet. The crate was just high enough to block him from view. He peeked around the box, fingers gripping the slats, waiting for the inevitable. Time ticked away.

Someone moved into the cellar, footsteps heavy and deliberate. Kyle panicked, pressing his palm against his mouth to still his breath. Hot tears scaled his eyes, but he dared not cry.

“Kyle?”

Kyle pressed his body closer to the crate. His mind screamed, *don't see, don't see*. His clogged nose stifled his breathing. Above him, the ceiling light flickered to life. The illumination pierced the gloomy cellar, casting his shadow against the wall.

“I know you're in here,” the teenager whispered. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Soft laughter rolled from his seeker's throat.

Snot dripped onto Kyle's top lip. Salty moisture gnawed his broken skin. He felt Benny's gaze upon him or at least in his general direction.

“If you twitch, you'll get stitched.” The taunt came in a slow, steady draw. Benny crept around the room, looking behind boxes and crates. “Come out, boy. Don't be such a baby. If you keep me waiting, I'll lock you up in the hidey hole.”

The “hole” was a closet with nothing in it but an old chair. It was the darkness and isolation Kyle feared the most. He had spent hours in the hole. At one point, a full day before he was rescued by one of the janitors. It was alleged, the hole was haunted by a dead boy who had jumped out of a third floor window. The specter would stand behind you and poke your spine with a razor-tipped fingernail. Some of the kids claimed they had the marks to prove it, scars and holes in their skin. It was a terrifying prospect.

He shouldn't have taken the soda cans. Kyle's chin dropped to his chest. Whatever had possessed him to steal from Benny in the first place? The bully coveted his treats. Benny hid

snacks under his cot, mostly stolen from Rose Hill residents. Kyle had taken a chance, grabbed the two sodas and had raced off, hoping somebody else would get the blame. Obviously, he'd been seen. Someone had squealed on him, and now Benny was seeking retribution.

"I'm waiting, Kyle."

He was just fooling himself. Benny would find him. The elder boy knew every crook and cranny, every hiding spot. The waiting was worse than the pummeling he'd surely receive. He hated to beg, but it was his only defense. On shaky knees, Kyle stood and stepped out of the shadows.

His tormentor grinned, rubbing his hands together. A glint lay in his green eyes.

"I'm here," Kyle said, hands held out in a plea. "Please, don't put me in the hole."

"Are you telling me what to do, boy?"

"No," Kyle said without conviction. He hated being called boy but when the aides weren't around, Benny liked to play he was in charge. No one knew the true extent of his bullying.

"I'll do whatever I want to you," Benny said. "Do you think you can stop me?"

"It was just one soda."

"One?" Benny's mouth twisted into a smirk. "It was two. Don't you think I don't know my own stuff? Where's Roy? I know he drank a can. I want him."

Kyle shuddered, swallowing hard. When he fled into the asylum's tunnels, he had assumed Roy had run off in another direction and escaped. It was hard enough worrying about himself, let alone Roy. Could his brother have followed him?

"Roy didn't take your soda," Kyle said, lifting his chin. "He was just my lookout. I drank both of them. He didn't even know they were yours."

"Liar," Benny said. "I don't care if he did drink it. He was your lookout, so that makes him just as guilty."

Hatred filled Kyle's heart, overrunning his fear. Roy was only seven years old, two years younger than he. The boy still sucked his thumb and wet the bed. But Benny wouldn't care. He liked tormenting anyone smaller than himself.

"Roy's not with me," Kyle said. "I don't know where he is."

"Liar," the teen said, pointing a finger into Kyle's face. "I want Roy now, or so help me God, you'll spend a week in the hole."

Another tear slipped down Kyle's cheek as he tried to think of a solution.

Benny's face darkened into a scowl. His eyebrows dipped low.

"I'll tell on you if you hurt us," Kyle said. His fear for Roy surpassed his own.

Shocked, Benny's eyes morphed into saucers. His eyes glowed in rage as his mouth twisted into a sneer. Two seconds later, Kyle yelped as Benny's fingers bit into his arm, dragging him along the floor, then dropped him face-first. His chin hit the cold floor, jarring his teeth.

"Tell who?" Benny shoved his foot into his back, digging in his heel. "Who you gonna tell?"

Kyle begged him to stop, the pain unbearable.

"I do what I want around here. You don't know who you're messing with. You know what happens to tattlers?"

"No, please. I won't say anything. I swear!" Kyle cried out as the boot tip jabbed his spine.

"Now I want Roy," the teen said. "And I want him now."

"Please. Just leave him alone. It's my fault. I made him be the lookout."

"Roy?" Ignoring Kyle's plea, Benny's voice boomed across the room. "It's going to go worse for you if you don't make an appearance. I know you're in here."

A muffled sob came from the distant side of the room.

"See that?" the teen said, shoving Kyle one last time with his boot. "Roy was here all along."

There was movement in the shadows. Kyle lifted his head, staring at Roy, who appeared from behind a chair, moving into the light. Blotchy-faced, the boy's freckles stood out against his pale skin. Dirty cobwebs clung to his blond head.

"Very wise, Roy." A grin slowly curved Benny's mouth. "Now we'll work this out, boys. Just the three of us. Stealing is a harsh offense. I know treats can be hard to come by around here." The teen's eyes glued onto Roy. Then with a jerk of his thumb, he glanced down at Kyle. "Get off your knees, boy. I'll deal with you later. You can go."

"But what about Roy?"

"Me and Roy are going to have a little talk. Now move it. Go upstairs. And don't look back."

Helplessly, Kyle observed Roy. The boy's thin shoulders shook in fear.

“Let him come with me,” Kyle said. He rose to his feet, panic for Roy rooting him to the spot. “He’s just a little kid.”

For speaking out, he was slapped. Face stinging, Kyle yelled as he was flung onto the hard floor. Blood filled his mouth. He rolled over and sat up.

“It’s okay, Kyle.” Roy’s voice sounded oddly flat. “Just go.”

Stunned, Kyle gaped at him. So did Benny, who seemed pleased by the turn of events.

But then Roy’s jaw stiffened, mouth set into an angry line. His clouded eyes cleared, replaced by defiance. “Go, Kyle. I’ll be fine.”

“You heard him. Now get.” Benny reached down, hauling Kyle to his feet. He shoved him toward the door. “And keep going.”

Dodging another blow, Kyle found himself forced into the corridor. He turned, helplessly staring at Roy.

Now Benny had one hand gripped around Roy’s arm, forcing him toward Kyle and the doorway. But then he was reaching for the door, slamming it shut in Kyle’s face.

Kyle stood by the metal barrier, listening. Nothing.

“Leave him alone!” he yelled, kicking the door. His toe stung from the abuse. “He didn’t take the soda. I did. I did.” Softly, he exhaled. “I took it.”

Then he was running through the endless corridor, moving as fast as he could. Tears streamed down his face as his hands balled into fists.

He’d tell. Faces swam in his mind. But who’d listen?

He stopped running.

No one. That’s who.