

## Degenerates

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### Prologue

Twenty years ago

Fear pulsed through eight-year old Tommy Fielding. He'd never seen daddy's face so crazed with rage or mommy so upset.

"Peter, he means nothing!" mommy cried. "Please forgive me! I swear I—"

"Shut up, whore!"

Daddy stomped to the coat closet by the front door. Mommy's shoulders bobbed as she wept. Tommy dashed under the kitchen table, cringed, and hugged his knees. He had never been so scared.

"Peter!" Mommy's voice went high and hysterical. "What are you doing? Put the shotgun down! For the love of God, Peter, put it down!"

"Fucking whore!" daddy roared. "You cheated on me! Take your punishment!"

"Peter, no I—"

The blast shook the house. Tommy jumped. He lifted a corner of the tablecloth and peered from his hiding place. Daddy stood over mommy's body. Only mommy didn't look like she should. There was a lot of blood.

"Bitch!" daddy muttered. He raised his head and looked around the room. "Thomas! Get in here! Whereja go, boy?"

Daddy stormed across the kitchen floor leaving bloody boot prints. He headed through the living room and onto the front porch. Neighbors shouted at him to drop the gun. Sirens screamed in the distance.

Tommy thought of scurrying upstairs to his bedroom and locking the door, even though he wasn't ever supposed to lock it. He heard daddy's footsteps returning.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck..." daddy repeated, as he staggered back into the kitchen. "Fucking whore!"

Tommy moved out from under the table and hopped up to run, but paused. Daddy stood in front of the kitchen window, shotgun in one hand, and a lit cigarette in the other. His attention was focused on the backyard. The stink of smoke, gunpowder, and blood suffused the room.

Tommy shifted his feet to run upstairs and the floor creaked.

Daddy jerked his head around. His eyes were wide, like two marbles. His face looked the color of milk.

"There you are," he said, and aimed the shotgun at Tommy's chest. "Just one thing I gotta tell ya, pal."

Tommy stood frozen with terror.

"Oh, daddy!" he moaned. "You killed mommy!"

"You listening to me, boy?"

Tommy wiped his runny nose on his pajama sleeve and nodded.

"Your momma's a whore who deserved what I done to her!"

Tommy hunched his shoulders and knotted his hands.  
“I want mommy back,” he whimpered, and began to cry. “Please daddy, bring mommy back.”

“Fuck her!” daddy spat. “It’s over!”

He whipped the shotgun around, put the barrel against his throat, and pulled the trigger. A blast shook the house a second time.

## CHAPTER 1 PRESENT DAY Tommy

The last remnants of sunlight drained into the horizon as Tommy prowled toward a large, ranch-style home snuggled behind preened landscaping. Sweat leaked from his brow, rolled down his cheeks, and soaked into the collar of his maroon T-shirt. Excitement prickled his skin.

A decade had passed since he’d left St. Anne’s Orphanage and School for Boys and he’d come back to Philadelphia to fulfill his destiny. Jeffery promised what he was about to do would give him the power of God. Jeffery assured him the power of God would bring mommy back. If mommy came back, she would take care of him. Make everything in his life perfect again.

Jeffery lived in Tommy’s mind. Jeffery was a good dog.

Tommy squatted behind a thick row of manicured privet and breathed deeply. Mossy turf, the cool night air, and a hint of a woman’s perfume invaded his nostrils. His belly swooned. He could barely contain himself. Everything was about to change.

He crawled close to the garage and stole a quick glance up the paved driveway. Two women were sitting on lawn chairs with their backs to him. A yellow citronella candle burned on a small, plastic table. Laughter ran festive through the air as the women sipped wine and talked.

*With this kill, you will become stronger!* Jeffery said inside Tommy’s head. *You will gain power!*

Tommy wrung his hands. Calluses from years of washing hot dishes in a greasy, truck stop kitchen had roughened his fingers. He hopped up, stepped around a puddle of water collected from the recent rain, and moved within striking range.

Crickets shut off their chirr.

“...and my Sarah is so stubborn,” one of the women was saying. “I keep telling her not to crayon on the wall and then I come into her room and she’s got a green dinosaur drawn across the entire side.”

The other woman laughingly replied; “I have that same problem with Jess.”

She raised her wine glass and bumped it against her lip.

“Oh, shoot!” she said, and brushed her front. “Look at me. And after only half a glass.”

“I’ll get a towel.”

Tommy didn’t expect the woman to stand up and turn around so quickly. Their eyes locked, and for a moment, seconds gelled and seemed to stretch into a queer slowdown of time.

His thoughts flashed backward in memory to the baby birds. The ones he'd found as a child under the eave at St. Anne's. The ones he'd crushed with his bare hands.

He lunged and arched out, grabbed under the woman's chin, and spun her head with a quick, savage twist that crunched bones. Her head lolled and she collapsed.

The other woman screamed and leapt from her seat. She stumbled backward, flailing her arms to keep balance. He charged after, tackled her, and smashed his fist into her face, flattening her nose, then grabbed her throat and squeezed. Her eyes bulged. The tendons in her face strained into lines.

The woman's mouth worked in raspy screams as she clawed savagely at his face, his hair, and the air. Little by little, she weakened. Finally, her muscles relaxed, her eyelids slid halfway down and her pupils filmed over.

She was dead.

He let go and her mass slumped to the asphalt.

He breathed heavily, relishing what he'd done. A feeling of omnipotent power surged through him. Sensation more furious than orgasm.

*Power will bring mommy back!* Jeffery said. *Killing gives you power!*

"Yes," Tommy agreed.

He checked up and down the driveway to make certain no one was watching, and then dragged the two women into the moon-shadow cast by the garage. He stood a moment admiring the flaccid bodies and then stooped to his knees.

*Do it!* Jeffery urged. *You've earned this session!*

Tommy's whole body tingled as he withdrew the ten-inch chef's knife he'd stolen from the truck stop, sank it into the woman's abdomen, and started his play.

Crickets resumed their chirr.