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**PART 1**

*The Formative Years*

JUNE 12, 1991

*Lizzie*

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER?"

"Nothing." Mammy continued to cradle me to her chest. "She's perfect."

"Why isn't she talking by now?" Caoimhe didn't look happy. She didn't sound happy either. "Lizzie is three, Mam. Three. And she's not doing anything she's supposed to be doing."

"She's fine, Caoimhe," Mammy said, using an extra happy voice. "She'll catch up." She kissed my cheek, and I burrowed in close to her chest. I loved her smell and the way she held me tight. I liked to press my ear against her chest and listen to her heart thump.

Thump, thump, thump.

I smiled and touched her face. She had the best face. She had kind eyes. They were blue, just like mine. I knew the color. I knew all the colors and wanted to tell my sister that. I just...couldn't get the words to come out.

My voice wouldn't work.

"Do you think she's slow?" Caoimhe asked, sounding sad, and I wanted to make her feel better because I wasn't slow at running. I was super fast. "Does she need, like, a special school or something?"

"This is not a conversation for little ears." Mammy's voice was cross now, and I didn't like it. Burrowing in deeper, I hid my face in her cardigan. "So please, just go and do your homework. We can talk about this tonight when your father gets home."

"I want to go home."

"We are home, Caoimhe."

"No, I want to go back to our real home," she shouted. "I hate it in England, Mam. I don't have any friends, and everyone at school teases me for the way I talk."

"They're idiots," Mammy told her. "Ignore them."

"That's easy for you to say," my sister said before turning to me. "You ruined everything," she screamed. "I wish you were never born."

"Caoimhe!"

"I'm not sorry, Mam, because it's true!"

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"Look at me, pretty girl," Mammy said after my sister had stomped out of the room.

"Show me those big, blue eyes."

I did.

"There you are." Smiling warmly, she brushed my hair off my face. "You are perfect, do you hear me?"

I nodded.

"You are my baby, and I will always look after you." She tickled under my chin and smiled. "And you must never let anyone make you feel like there is something wrong with you." She tickled my chin again. "Do you understand me, Lizzie?"

I nodded again.

"Good." She smiled again. "I love you, sweetheart."

OCTOBER 31, 1991

Lizzie

"BE NORMAL WHEN MY FRIENDS COME OVER," CAOIMHE SAID. "DON'T DO ANYTHING embarrassing, okay?" She turned around to look at me. "No screaming fits or throwing yourself around on the floor."

I nodded in understanding.

"God." She shook her head. "I wish you would just speak, Lizzie!"

I shrugged.

"How am I supposed to know you even understand me if you won't talk?"

I didn't like it when I made her mad.

It made me feel bad.

It made my face grow hot.

It made my nails get scratchy.

"No," Caoimhe warned, attention moving to my scratchy nails. She stood up from her dressing table and walked over to the bed. "You are not allowed to do that." Crouching down in front of me, she took my hands in hers and looked in my eyes. "You are *not* allowed to hurt yourself."

*I'm sorry, I wanted to tell her. I don't know how to make it stop.*

Instead, I reached up and touched her cheek.

Her blue eyes started to water. "Please talk to me." Sniffing, she swept me up in her arms and held me to her chest. "Please, Liz, just one word. I'm begging you."

*I'm trying.*

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NOVEMBER 12, 1991

*Lizzie*

"CONSIDERING HER FREQUENT VIOLENT OUTBURSTS AT NURSERY AND TAKING INTO account the strong family history, I would like to start Elizabeth on a treatment plan."

"When you say treatment, are you talking about counseling?"

"And medication."

"She's three and a half," Mammy strangled out. "All three-year-olds throw tantrums for Christ's sake."

"Those aren't tantrums, Catherine, and you know it," Daddy replied. "Give it to us straight, Doc. What's the diagnosis?"

"It's too early to tell."

"But you have a theory, don't you?" he pushed. "You think she has it, doesn't she?"

"Not necessarily, but there is evidence to suggest Elizabeth is experiencing psychotic episodes. What concerns me is her lack of awareness and the frequent blackout episodes." He twisted a pen between his fingers. "She appears to have no memory of what she does."

"You don't know that," Mammy snapped, smoothing my hair with her hand. "You won't know that until she starts talking."

DECEMBER 21, 1991

*Lizzie*

"THIS IS AN AIRPLANE," MAMMY EXPLAINED, WAVING HER HAND AROUND IN FRONT of us. "It's going to fly us home to Ireland."

I narrowed my eyes.

I *knew* what an airplane was.

"Don't look at me like that," she laughed. "How am I supposed to know you know these things?"

I gave her another look, telling her with my eyes that I wasn't stupid.

"Okay, okay," she chuckled, holding her hands up. "I'm sorry for doubting you, sweetheart."

I smiled.

"Oh, you like surprising me, don't you?"

I grinned.

"Clever girl," she praised, hooking her arm around my shoulders. "You're as sharp as a razor in there, aren't you?"

Nodding, I looked over to where Daddy was sitting with Caoimhe and frowned.

I knew they were cross with me.

I just didn't know why.

"Don't worry," she whispered, tightening her arm around me. "They love you, too, sweetheart. Just like Mammy loves you."

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**JANUARY 6, 1992**

*Lizzie*

"No," CAOIMHE ARGUED. "NO WAY. I'M NOT MOVING SCHOOLS AGAIN."

"Caoimhe, love, we've talked about this. Please try to understand."

"I'm not fucking moving again," she screamed. "I have friends at St. Joseph's, and you promised I could go back to my old school when we came home." She shook her head and backed toward the door. "You promised, Mam!"

"We tried, Caoimhe," Mammy told her, looking sad. "But the principal said it's not possible to re-enroll you. They don't have the space, love."

"It's not fair," my sister cried, sobbing loudly. "My life is fucking over!"

"Don't say that," Mammy said, trying to coax. "You'll be just as happy over at St. Theresa's."

"But it's an all-girls school," Caoimhe cried. "Run by the nuns."

"It's only for a year and a half, and then you'll go off to secondary school and meet up with all your old friends."

"I fucking hate you!" Caoimhe cried. I was still sitting on the step when she barged past me. "Get out of the way," she screamed, shoving me with her foot. "You're always in the fucking way, Lizzie!"

"Caoimhe!" Mam shouted, following after her. "Don't you dare take it out on your sister!"

I wanted to tell her I was sorry, but I couldn't get the words out.

"It's not your fault, Lizzie." Mammy smiled and crouched down in front of me. "You haven't done anything."

I reached up and cupped her cheek in my small hand.

Sniffing, she closed her eyes and covered my hand with hers. "I'm not crying, sweetheart," she said, answering the question in my head.

She was.

I could feel the wet on my hand.

"Be a good girl and go on up to bed now." When she opened her eyes, she was smiling a big smile. "And remember that Mammy loves you very much."

*I love you, too, Mammy.*

**FEBRUARY 10, 1992**

*Lizzie*

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH THAT CHILD!"

"Mike, she doesn't understand."

"She's disturbed, Catherine. A blind man can see that."

"How can you say that about your own flesh and blood?"

"I can't take it, Catherine. I'm sorry."

"You're a fucking coward, that's why."

"It's killing me to watch her like this."

"And you don't think it's killing me, Mike? The difference is I would never leave her."

"I'm not leaving her, but I have to get out of this house or I'm going to lose my mind right along with her."

"Some father you are, turning your back the minute things get tough."

"Catherine."

"Go on, then! Run away, Mike. We'll be better off alone than with a spineless coward."

JUNE 9, 1992

*Lizzie*

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO LIZZIE, happy birthday to you."

My parents and Caoimhe all huddled around me, smiling and singing birthday songs.

It made me feel happy.

I liked it.

Daddy was even smiling as he took pictures on his camera.

"Blow out your candles," Mammy said, pointing to the pink birthday cake in front of me. "And make a wish, sweetheart."

Leaning forward, I took a big breath and blew it out as hard as I could.

When the flames on the candles went out, they all cheered.

*For me.*

I smiled happily.

"Does she even know it's her birthday?" Caoimhe asked then, and it made me cross. Of course I did. I had a birthday cake, didn't I? She laughed before adding, "She probably doesn't even know what age she's turning."

Planting my hands on my hips, I turned to my sister and glared. "Four."

Caoimhe's eyes widened in surprise. "What did you just say?"

"Four," I repeated, still cross with her. "I'm not silly." I pointed to the candles on my cake. "One, two, three, four."

Now, Mammy and Daddy were looking at me with big, wide eyes.

"Did she just..."

"Yes, she definitely did."

"Oh my God."

"She can talk."

"Never mind talking. She can count."

"Say something else," Caoimhe commanded, sounding excited. "Come on, Liz, tell us something else."

I frowned at her. "Like what?"

"Oh my God!" Caoimhe squealed, jumping from foot to foot as she clapped her hands. "She actually answered me!"

I always answered her, but she just couldn't hear me.

None of them could.

"Am I talking out loud?" I asked, confused. "You can hear me?"

All three of them nodded.

They looked so happy.

They were smiling at me.

"What's my name?" my sister asked, still bouncing.

"Caoimhe Young."

"Oh my God," she cried out, clapping her hands again. "What's your name?"

"Lizzie Young."

My sister yelped excitedly before pointing at our parents. "And who are they?"

"Mammy and Daddy," I replied, frowning when I saw they were both crying. "Are you sad?"

"No," Daddy choked out, throwing his arms around me. "We're happy."

OCTOBER 11, 1992

*Lizzie*

"SHE RUINED MY LIFE!" CAOIMHE SCREAMED. "I CAN NEVER SHOW MY FACE AT SCHOOL again."

"Caoimhe!"

"Everyone is talking about me."

"No, they're not."

"Yeah, they are, Mam, and it's all her fault."

"Caoimhe, please."

"I'm not going to school tomorrow if she's there."

"You're in sixth class, Caoimhe. Your sister is in junior infants. You're on opposite sides of the school."

"I don't care! I'm not going if she's there."

"Oh yes you are."

"She shouldn't even be at my school because there's something fucked-up wrong with her!" Throwing her schoolbag on the floor, she turned to glare at me. "Why did you have to come to my school?" Releasing a furious scream, she looked at our parents. "Why couldn't you have sent her somewhere else?"

"Caoimhe, you need to settle down," Mam said, moving to stand between us. "She's only four, sweetheart, and she's come leaps and bounds this year. Don't be angry with her."

"Angry with her?" Caoimhe's eyes bulged. "I fucking hate her, Mam!"

"Caoimhe!"

"She's a fucking lunatic, Mam."

"Don't you dare call your sister that word."

"Why not? It's the truth. Half the time she's a mute, and the other half, she's screaming her head off and attacking anyone who gets near her." My sister threw her hands up and screamed. "She attacked another child in her classroom, for fuck's sake. My friend's baby brother! She drew blood. You can't honestly think that's normal behavior."

"That's enough!" That was Daddy. He walked over and wrapped his arm around Mammy's shoulder. "Don't raise your voice to your mother. You know she's not well."

"Yeah, from another plague she brought into our lives," Caoimhe spat. "First Lizzie and now cancer!"

"Don't you dare say that about your mother!" Daddy roared. He led Mammy over to her armchair and helped her sit down before turning back to Caoimhe.

Meanwhile, I made a beeline for my mother, feeling scared and cross and worried all at once. Climbing onto her lap, I burrowed into her chest, but it felt different now. Flat and bony. Not soft like it used to be.

"It's okay," Mammy whispered, wrapping her arms around me. Her skin looked yellow now, not peach like it used to, and her head was shiny and bald.

"Now, I've been cutting you slack because I understand how hard the past couple of years have been on you, but you've overstepped your mark, young lady," Daddy told Caoimhe. "I understand your frustrations, and I feel for you, but taking it out on your sick mother is not the way to handle this, Caoimhe."

Breaking down in front of him, my sister covered her face with her hands and screamed, "I wish I was dead!"

NOVEMBER 4, 1992

*Lizzie*

"LIZZIE, SWEETHEART, ARE YOU UP?" MAMMY WALKED INTO MY ROOM AND SIGHED when she saw me still in bed. "We talked about this." Closing the space between us, she sat on the edge of my bed and gently stroked my hair. "You have to get up for school, baby."

"I'm so tired," I croaked out, feeling like my arms and legs didn't work anymore.

"That's because your body is getting used to the new medication," Mammy explained. "You'll feel better soon."

"I don't want to be me anymore."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I'm bad."

"You're not bad, sweetheart."

"Yes, I am." I blinked back the tears filling my eyes. "That's why you give me those tablets. I heard Caoimhe and Daddy talking about it. It's because I'm crazy."

"No, Lizzie, no." Mam cupped my face in her hands. "You are not crazy, sweetheart. Do you hear me? You are perfect just the way you are."

"Then why do they hate me?" I sobbed, turning my face away. "Why does everyone look at me funny?"

"They don't hate you, sweetheart, and nobody looks at you funny."

"They do." I sniffled. "I know."

NOVEMBER 27, 1992

*Lizzie*

CURLING UP IN A BALL ON THE COUCH IN THE SITTING ROOM, I COVERED MY EARS AND tried to block out the shouting, but I could still hear them.

"It's for the best, Catherine," Daddy shouted from the kitchen. "Trust me, I've been through this before."

"I don't care," Mam argued back. "I am not medicating that child another day."

"She needs the medication."

"She needs a childhood!" Mam cried. "She's our baby, our child, and I refuse to continue this farce."

"You want to talk about farces, Catherine? Really?"

"She is not taking another pill. Do you hear me? It stops right now."

"And when she acts out again? What then?"

"We'll handle it."

"I won't move Caoimhe again," he warned. "It's not fair on our other daughter. You do remember her, don't you?"

"That's not fair, and you know it."

"No, what's not fair is living my whole life the way I have and having to repeat the cycle all over again."

"What were we supposed to do?"

"Well, I know what you should have done!" he roared. "You should have fucking—"

"Oh my God, stop! I can hear you from upstairs." That was Caoimhe. "What's wrong?"

"Your mother thinks it's a good idea to take your sister off her meds."

"Are you insane?" That was Caoimhe. "Mam, she has to take them."

"Don't start."

"She is an actual human when she's on them, Mam. Take her off them and she'll go right back to being a feral monster."

"Caoimhe!"

"I'm sorry, but it's true. Dad's right. She needs to be on those tablets. The doctors said it themselves. Multiple doctors, Mam. Multiple times."

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"Maybe we're not looking at this the right way," Dad added. "Maybe a residential school would be her best fit."

"I am not sending her away."

"Not permanently."

"No way. It's not happening!"

Scrambling to my feet, I bolted upstairs to my bedroom as fast as I could. I quietly closed the door and sank down on the floor, hand still gripping the circular knob.

I had to make my family love me.

If I didn't, they were going to send me away.

"Stop fighting it," a voice in my head commanded, and I flinched when the watery image of a woman's face flashed before my eyes. "Just give in. It'll all be better then."

Oh no.

The voice was back.

The scary voice.

The one that made me wet the bed.

The one that made me fight.

Clamping my hands over my ears, I hummed loudly to drown it out.

I had to make the voice go away.

DECEMBER 25, 1992

Lizzie

"I KNEW COMING HOME WAS A BAD IDEA, MIKE. I BLOODY KNEW WE WERE ASKING FOR trouble, and I was right!"

"Calm down, Catherine. You can't let yourself get worked up like this. You're in the middle of chemo, love. You need to take it easy."

"How in the name of God am I supposed to calm down when that woman was in my house? I can't breathe thinking about what could've happened today, Mike!"

Flushing the toilet, I climbed onto the booster step placed in front of the sink, the one that helped me reach the tap, and reached for the orange bar of soap.

"I tried to warn you in England, but you wouldn't listen. You were hell-bent on doing things your way when I fucking begged you not to. Now, you're getting a small glimpse into what life was like for me, what life is going to be for us."

"Don't think like that!"

"I can't help it. I can see it coming down the tracks like a freight train, and we're stuck."

"It's a small chance, Michael, not a guarantee. So don't you dare throw it back in my face. How dare you resent me for doing the right thing!"

"The right thing for who?"

"For our family!"

"Maybe for you, but it was never the right thing for me."

"How can you stand there and say that to me?"

"Because that's how I feel, Catherine. That's my truth. I didn't get to have a say in any of this because you took my choices away from me!"

I turned on the water and giggled when the soap squished between my hands, like a slippery fish.

"We have to move, Michael. We can't stay here anymore. She's too dangerous."

"I'm not moving again. This is my family home, Catherine. The house my parents raised me in. This is where I belong."

"Well, I'm going back to Cork to my family home—where I belong, where that monster can't find us!"