

# INSANE

by Marianne Ellison

## Part One

### Chapter One

“Dinner is almost ready, son. Time to clean up your toys, okay?” his mother said.

“Aw, mama! Can’t I play just a little more?” the seven year old pleaded.

“No, sweetheart. Clean up now. Your papa will be home soon and we’ll be eating dinner. Come on, now. Be a good boy.”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly.

He was trying to be a very good boy. Christmas was coming and he knew that Santa was watching. Mama told him that papa would be bringing home the Christmas tree today and Santa would be coming the next night. He could hardly wait!

There were few things in his short life that he could remember being this exciting. After his toys were cleaned up he nervously went from in front of the TV to the front window. Every time he heard a car he jumped up to see if it was papa with the tree. Each time it was not he’d slink back to his spot in front of the TV.

It was starting to get dark, but it always got dark early this time of year. But that made it harder to see the cars when they went by the house. None of them stopped, though. And now mama was starting to check the front window, too.

Mama poured herself another drink. He heard the ice clink in her glass even though she stayed in the kitchen to drink it. He didn't know what mama drank from the bottle she kept in the kitchen, but he knew that papa didn't like it.

The phone rang. Mama answered it. She talked real low so he couldn't hear what she said. He did hear, though, when mama slammed the phone down. And then, just a little bit later, he heard a glass break in the kitchen. Then mama came out of the kitchen and went upstairs. He was confused and he was hungry.

## Chapter Two

He stood on the top step of the small house holding a box. Inside the box were all of his Matchbox cars. Mama told him that they needed to live with grandma for a while. Papa needed to live with his little home wrecker for now. He looked down the street, the wind tousling his brown hair. There were a couple of other boys on the street. They stood in a clump and stared at him.

"Son?" mama called from inside the house. "Come in now, son. We have to put our things away."

He hung his head and went into the house. Mama was already heading upstairs to their bedroom. He passed by grandma's sewing room and went into the small room he and his mama would be sharing. Mama took the box from him and put it up on the shelf in the closet. There was no room for all of his toys anymore.

“It’s only for a little while, sweetheart,” she told him, sniffing. But he saw the small tear glistening on her cheek. His small hand slipped into hers and squeezed.

They put the last of their things away and mama put the sheets and blankets on the bed. Then they went downstairs for dinner. Grandma didn’t talk much, concentrating on her food instead. But, every once in a while the old woman would stop slurping her soup to expound on some rule they were to follow for living in her house. But the rules were never directed to him – always to mama.

“Don’t forget that I sleep late in the mornings. You and the boy will not make any noise before I get up.”

“I will not tolerate a messy house. The boy will keep his toys in your room.”

“I won’t tolerate the boy having all of the boys from the neighborhood tramping through my house or yard.”

“You can take care of your own laundry for you and the boy.”

And so it went. He sank lower and lower in his chair throughout dinner. The old woman smacked her lips through dinner, too. He saw, at the most, two teeth in her mouth. With her gray hair held in a tight bun at the base of her neck and her gravelly voice, he was utterly frightened of her. And she smelled funny, too.

That night, he climbed into bed next to his mother. She cried herself to sleep, softly moaning “Oh Johnny! Oh Johnny!” over and over again. That night they clung to each other because truly they were alone in the world now.

## Chapter Three

He started a new school. He tried to make new friends. But as the new kid it was hard. They already had their circle of friends and he wasn't one of them. They said he talked funny, like a southern hick. Instead they laughed at him. But he never told his mama. She worried too much as it was. He didn't want to have to worry about him.

So he learned to move around his grandma's house without making any noise. He learned to eat quietly and play quietly within the confines of the bedroom he shared with his mama. But most of all he learned that if he could be invisible to his grandma then his life was happier. Or at least it was more tolerable.

Days became weeks became months became years. His life changed very little. When he didn't have school he took to wandering around the neighborhood. He found a place in the woods not too far from his grandma's house that he could call his own. He learned to build various traps to catch small animals. Some he let go when he caught them. Others he did not. It all depended on how his day was going. It wasn't his fault. It was grandma's fault they died. Someone had to suffer what she did, for how she talked to mama.

He was almost thirteen now and still shared the little bedroom with his mother. His grandma had died two years before and he had once tried to suggest his mother move into grandma's room only to see mama break down and cry. She couldn't sleep alone, she begged. So he slept on his side of the mattress, hugging the very edge, praying he would not turn over in the night and touch something he didn't want to touch.

## Chapter Four

No matter how he tried to move from his mother's shadow, the more she pulled him back into it. He talked to her once about taking a job after school. The look her face nearly broke his heart.

"You want to get a job? But why, son?" she asked, tears welling in her eyes.

"Mama, I need to earn some money," he pleaded quietly.

"What do you need money for? Don't I give you all you need?"

"Of course, mama! Of course! But, well, there's a girl I want to ask to the prom. I will need money for the tux, and her flowers, and tickets. You know..." he drifted off.

"A girl?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"Mama, it's only the prom," he tried to reason.

"Well," she started and then made a small choking noise. He knew what was coming and he closed his eyes while she finished. "If you want to get a job and leave me alone every afternoon to fend for myself, then that is what you should do."

"No, mama. You are right. I won't get a job. That's all right," he sighed. "Oh, mama, don't cry. It's all right." He put his arm around her and patted her back.

“Thank you, son. You are a good boy. You really love your mama, don’t you?”

“Yes, mama. I do.”

And so he didn’t get a job. He didn’t go to the prom. There were no after school sports, no friends that came to the house. His summers were interminable. Day after day seeing no one but his mama. Nothing to do but tend to her and wander through the woods. He had, over time, perfected his traps. And now, he practiced how far he could push things with the animals he caught before they died. He kept extremely detailed notes showing his progress, but these notes were in his own personal code. He knew that his hobby was dangerous and he would only be allowed to continue if he was extremely careful. He kept his activities to a minimum and his notes carefully hidden.

Nonetheless, high school as a whole was the most torturous four years of his life. He consistently kept a 4.0 grade average all four years and graduated with honors. It was with mixed emotions he told his mother about the scholarship he was offered. She was very happy her boy, who she always said was brilliant, was so honored but then he had to tell her.

“Mama, the scholarship is for USC... in California.”

Her lower lip started to tremble, just a bit. “California?” she whispered.

“Mama. It will be okay.”

“You’re going to California!” she croaked.

“Just for school. I’ll be back. I’ll be home for Christmas break, Easter break, and summers! And it will only be four years of undergraduate and then three years of post-graduate school.”

“California?”

“Mama, I found these for you,” he said, showing her pamphlets for social clubs and adult centers where she could spend her days. But he saw the look in her eyes. “Mama, I don’t have enough money to go school here. I need that scholarship!” he pleaded.

He wanted to be angry with her. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t. She had made the arrangements to pay for his school but only if he agreed to go locally so he could stay at home. He had no choice but to agree.

So that fall he joined the freshman class of the University of Tennessee. His 4.0 grade average from high school translated into a 3.4 his first year. But mama was happy to know he’d be home with her every day after school.