

## "FALSE FACES"

### PROLOGUE

**T**he first thing I must do is ask for your forgiveness.

When I wrote the Justin Wright Suspense Series, I committed a sin of omission. My goal for those books was to honor my grandfather—to capture his strength, determination, and unwavering belief in the human spirit. I couldn't bear to cloud his legacy with my personal issues or psychological struggles. It wouldn't have been fair—to him, or to my readers, the ones who turned his inspiring life stories into the foundation of a bestselling series.

But now, at twenty-six, it's time to bridge the gap—to address the internal battles I've been wrestling with since writing *Avenged* nearly three years ago. It's a backstory that's essential for you to know because it's a part of who I am and intricately tied to the *Edge of Fear Series* you're about to dive into. So before we go any further, it's time to share a few secrets...

After what happened with Richard Davis, I was a complete wreck. Eating, when I remembered to eat, felt like a chore. Sleep? Forget it. The nightmares made sure I never got more than two or three hours a night. They'd start off innocently enough, like regular dreams, and then—BAM—blood. It was everywhere. On the floors, the walls, smeared across my sneakers, legs, and hands. It clung to me like some sticky, deep-red glue, reeking of rust, impossible to scrub off no matter how desperately I tried. Even wiping it onto my pants or the carpet didn't help.

I never knew where I was in those dreams, not exactly. It could be a strange house, a warehouse, or some rickety old shed in a yard I didn't recognize. But the setting didn't matter—everything was always bathed in red. It was like wearing glasses with ruby-tinted lenses, turning the world into a hazy, endless sea of blood.

Believe it or not, that wasn't even the worst part of the nightmares.

It was when Gramp appeared. At first, he'd show up with that familiar, contented smile—the one he always wore while jotting notes in his journal or sitting at Gram's desk. But then, without warning, I'd hear it: the shot. The crack of a distant gun, far away but deafening, echoing inside my skull. I'd clutch my ears, trying to block out the ringing as my knees buckled beneath me.

When I looked up, Gramp was on the floor, lying in a pool of blood. He writhed in the sticky crimson, his face twisted in agony, his expression begging me to save him. His eyelids flickered—opening, closing, over and over—until his eyes rolled back, and his body fell still.

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That's usually when I'd snap awake to find my dad beside my bed, either holding my shoulder or gripping my hands. I'd be drenched in sweat, so weak I could barely sit up, often disoriented, unsure I was even in the guest bedroom of Dad and Janelle's apartment. This nightly ritual went on until Dad connected me with Emily, one of the top PTSD therapists in New York.

With therapy twice a week and Valium to calm my nervous system, things gradually started to improve. After three months, we scaled back to one session a week, then to twice a month, until finally, I felt strong enough to stop altogether. It took half a year for the therapy to truly take effect, for the Valium to steady me, and for the nightmares to fade. The relief was overwhelming, for both me and my dad.

At the time, I really thought I was okay—that with the support of my dad, mom, Janelle, and Emily, I had worked through all the classic stages of trauma recovery: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, and Sadness. I believed I'd reached Acceptance and was ready to start a "normal" life.

Looking back now, I see it was just wishful thinking, propped up by its old ally: emotional suppression.

While grappling with all the psychological upheaval, I found solace in spending my time sifting through Gramp's journals. They became my refuge, a way to escape the chaos in my mind. Using them as inspiration to write the first book in the series not only kept me grounded but also gave me what I believed was a clear path to recovery.

My father's contact, Will Hart—an editor at EJ Manning

Publishers—was so impressed with the rough draft of *Altered*, I was offered a significant advance and a generous royalty contract to write the entire Justin Wright Suspense Series.

I was ecstatic.

The first thing I did was move out of my dad's and Janelle's apartment and rent a small Cape Cod-style home on the waterfront in Rye. It had stunning views of the Long Island Sound from almost every room. The location was perfect—close enough to visit both my parents weekly, yet far enough away to grant me the privacy I craved and to finally distance myself from Gramp's house and the haunting memories it held.

I wasn't surprised when my parents told me they didn't approve. They argued that twenty-one was too young to live alone in such an isolated area and urged me to choose a place where I could socialize more easily and enjoy my youth. But I wasn't ready for that yet. Though the nightmares had finally loosened their grip, I still wasn't prepared to dive back into the everyday life like others my age.

The struggles I'd endured had made me hesitant to seek out social interaction, and, if I'm being completely honest, the typical priorities of my peers—parties, drinking, drugs, and sex—well, they just weren't the same as mine.

My primary goal was to share my grandfather's stories with the world. My focus was clear: to share my grandfather's stories with the world. My writing career depended on it. Solitude was the only way I could truly concentrate on my work, so I signed a two-year lease, hoping my parents would one day understand.

After a few months of seeing how content and productive I was in my new home, my parents eventually conceded. They told

me they respected my decision, but their expressions told a different story.

Within four months, I had completed the first drafts of books one and two of the series. Five months later, after countless hours of editing and rewriting, the books were flying off the shelves... and the digital downloads came close to breaking records. I never imagined that Gramp's life, his patients' struggles and the emotional battles our family faced would resonate so deeply—not only with people who had known him, but also with complete strangers. Yet the strong sales, and steadily growing bank deposits, made it clear just how impactful his stories were.

Life was good. I joined a writing group and started doing yoga at a studio a few miles away to help improve my concentration. To my surprise, it worked. I was able to write for hours at a time without being consumed by worry and anxiety. I even made a few casual friends from the group, acquaintances I'd occasionally meet for dinner or drinks. My life was running as smoothly as a well-tuned car until...

I started writing Book 3, *Avenged*.

That's when Richard Davis made his debut. Since the timeline of the books followed Gramp's journals, there was no way to avoid him. Including Davis in the story was inevitable—whether or not I was ready to confront everything his character represented.

With every page I typed, a growing unease settled over me. I felt strained, nervous, and jittery. I worked hard to push through the feelings, relying on the distraction techniques Emily had

taught me. But the moment I closed my laptop, the negative emotions came rushing back.

At first, it was intense irritability and anxiety. Then, anger and frustration crept in. I spent hours scouring the internet for ways to soothe my restless imagination and calm my nerves, but nothing worked. The endless searching only disrupted my rhythm further, flooding my mind with a chaotic stream of agitating thoughts.

Ironically, my negative, disruptive state of mind seemed to enhance my storytelling. It fueled my creativity, allowing me to write faster, with greater depth, and even earning high praise from my editing team. It was inexplicable. My psychological turmoil became a boon for my writing. But for my life outside the pages, it was nothing short of disastrous.

Sleep had once again become elusive. I'd drift off for a few hours, only to wake up, staring into the darkness. Nightmares? I wasn't sure. I didn't wake up drenched in sweat, so probably not. If I was dreaming, I remembered nothing.

I'd toss and turn, unable to settle, until eventually, I'd give up and trudge down the hall to my study to write. By day, exhaustion would catch up with me, forcing me to sneak in a nap—which only made sleeping through the night even more difficult.

As time went on, I pulled away from my dad, mom, and pretty much everyone else. I didn't want to deal with people while I was struggling to get my shit together. That's when the flashbacks started. Not just memories, but vivid, full-blown

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movies playing on a giant screen in my head, convincing me I was losing my grip on reality, bit by bit.

They felt so real that sometimes I could swear I actually felt my grandfather in my arms; the weight of his body slamming against mine with every gunshot, the terrible sensation of him slipping from my embrace. I could hear the faint moan escape his lips, feel the last breath leaving his lungs as he went limp, and then the awful thud as his body hit the floor.

And then, just as it had happened that day, I'd look up and see Davis—the crazed man—standing only a few feet away. I'd watch, helpless, as he raised the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Because I had closed my eyes at that exact moment when it happened in real life, the screen in my mind would turn black. But the scene would reset, starting all over again...and again...and again.

I withdrew from my in-person writing group, stopped attending yoga, and avoided outings with acquaintances, pouring all my energy into writing. I used the remainder of Gramp's journal to complete three more books, though even now, the process of writing, editing, rewriting, and collaborating with Will to finish the series is still a blur.

Despite the mental blocks and constant battles with myself, the true challenge came when I had to recount the Richard Davis incident in the final book, *Revealed*. That's when my anxiety spiraled out of control, and my inner turmoil reached its breaking point.

I'd been circling this dark hole for three years, and when I finally fell in, I couldn't find my way out. Just days after my

twenty-fifth birthday, I stopped answering my phone, cut myself off from everyone except Will, and refused to leave the house. I even had a mail slot installed in my front door so I wouldn't have to step outside to get the mail. The beauty of my waterfront home, with the Long Island Sound stretching out before me, had lost its allure. I couldn't remember the last time I stepped onto the back deck to breathe in the fresh air.

I wanted to ask my dad for help, but guilt held me back. Gramp had died protecting me, sacrificing his life for mine because that's who he was. And now I was supposed to ask his son for help? I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

I considered calling Emily, but what more could she do? She'd already helped stop the nightmares and guided me back to some semblance of normalcy. What else was there besides more meds? I didn't want her to see how far I'd fallen, how badly I'd failed. She might see my failure as her own, and I'd already let down enough people.

That was just another example of how the fog of guilt and cloudy thinking led me to make all the wrong decisions.

So, I suffered alone. With the last book of the series finished, even writing couldn't serve as my escape. Desperate for a way to keep my mind occupied, I started a journal, just like my grandfather, hoping that one day I might create stories based on my own life. But since I never left the house, there wasn't much to write about. I was confused, isolated, and spiraling. Basically, I was screwed.

Then came the day I seriously considered walking into the Sound and never turning back. I stood by the upstairs bedroom



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window, watching the tide strip sand from the shore, and wondered how long it would take for that same tide to drag me out into the endless darkness of the ocean.

That's when I heard it: persistent knocking at the front door, faint and distant, as though it were coming from miles away. My heart pounded like a jackhammer as I trudged down the stairs and tiptoed to the door. I had covered the sidelights to stop anyone from looking in, so I peered through the peephole.

Outside stood my father and Janelle, glancing at each other, then at the door, then back at one another again.

My brain screamed at me to ignore the knocking, to pretend I wasn't home. But they knew I hadn't left the house in almost a year. If I didn't answer the door, they'd either think I was dead or know I was deliberately avoiding them. Deep down, I felt a pull—a desperate urge to let them in, to let them help me. Because if I didn't, things might end with someone finding me floating face down in the Sound.

Then again, if I was dead, I wouldn't feel their disappointment. Would I?

*Stop!*

As soon as I opened the door, my father grabbed me and hugged me tightly, just like the first day I returned from Mexico. His embrace was so strong that, for a moment, I worried I wouldn't be able to breathe. I glanced at Janelle, who gave me a small, reassuring smile and placed her hand gently on my dad's shoulder, urging him to ease up.

When he finally loosened his grip and stepped back, his eyes met mine, and I saw the sadness etched into his face. His gaze drifted down to my wrinkled T-shirt and ripped jeans. Before I

could even think of what to say, Janelle stepped forward, kissed my cheek, and wrapped me in a soft hug. Her gentle expression made me realize how selfish and foolish I'd been.

I should have reached out to them months ago.

My father brushed my cheek with the back of his hand. "Let's go talk in the den," he said, taking Janelle's hand and mine.

Once we were seated, he repeated what he'd been telling me for two years: Delayed-onset PTSD. I nodded, like always. In the past, I blamed my behavior on the need to finish the series and meet deadlines. It was the perfect excuse—not enough time to go out with them, socialize, or make friends. But now that the series was complete, that excuse no longer held up. I still hadn't gone outside. I was irritable, anxious, sleepless, and plagued by flashbacks. God, those flashbacks.

Then he asked the question that changed everything.

"Do you want to do another series?"

"Of course," I answered defensively. What kind of question was that? Without writing, I'd have nothing.

"Then you need to start seeing Emily again. Otherwise, EJ Manning won't renew your contract."

It felt like a blowtorch had scorched the pit of my stomach. Had he talked to Will behind my back? Did they come up with this ultimatum together? Or was it just my father's idea?

"What did you say to him? Will never comments on how I live my life. You must've brought this up to him. Why would you do that? Writing is my life. Why are you trying to take it away?"

"I'm not trying to take it away. I'm trying to give you your

*life* back,” he said calmly. “I told Will your mental health is more important than your writing career.”

“My books are bringing in millions for them. They’re not going to give that up.”

He sat silently, glancing at Janelle. She kept her eyes fixed on her hands.

“They will,” he said softly, “if they don’t believe you can write another series.”

My stomach churned, lava bubbling just below the surface. “And why would they believe I couldn’t?”

He fidgeted, his gaze darting toward the window before locking back onto mine and changing the subject.

“Why are you so against talking with Emily again? Are you happy living like this? No friends, no fun, never leaving this house? You’re trapped here,” he said, gesturing around the room, his movements sharp, almost desperate. “And here.” He tapped his temple with his index finger. “I want you to enjoy life, not just survive it. Emily helped you before and she can help you again.”

He paused, letting the silence settle over us, heavy and suffocating. “Tell me you’re happy, and I’ll leave you alone. Tell me this is the life you’ve always wanted for yourself, and I won’t say another word.” He leaned in closer, his gaze steady and unrelenting. “Be honest. Tell me this is what you want, and I’ll stop.”

He was right, and it nearly broke me. I had to swallow hard to keep the tears from spilling over. I couldn’t tell him I was happy. I couldn’t even remember the last time I laughed or smiled, the last time I had dinner out, or walked along the coast.

I wasn't happy. I was miserable. Sad. Angry. Scared.

Worst of all, I was agoraphobic in every sense of the word. I was trapped—inside my house and inside my head.

“You're right,” I admitted. “Okay? You're right. But you never answered my question. Why would Will or EJ Manning think I couldn't write another series? I did some of my best work in this house—especially the last three books. They were the best. The darker my world got, the better the book.” I forced a laugh, but it sounded hollow, even to me.

My father glanced at Janelle, then back at me. “That's not funny, Daniel.”

“Janelle,” I said, grasping for an ally. “Do you know why anyone would think I couldn't write another series?”

She leaned forward on the sofa, clasping her hands together. “Please don't put me in the middle of this, Daniel. It won't work, and I think you know that. I'm here to support you both, not take sides.”

“I see why you're such a good prosecutor,” I said, my attempt at humor weak and transparent. “You never say what—”

“Daniel, stop!” my father yelled, his voice sharp and raw. “Don't take this out on Janelle. You want the truth? I'll give you the truth.”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. When he opened them, they glistened with unshed tears.

“I've been worried about you for years,” he said, his voice quieter now, trembling. “I've watched you change—from a vibrant, excited, thoughtful young man into someone who's

isolated, sad, angry... agoraphobic. I stood by for too long. I had to do something. That's why I called Will."

I didn't know whether to cry with him or throw him out. How dare he talk to my editor—or anyone—about me? I wasn't a ten-year-old anymore, where he could sit down with a teacher or fútbol coach to discuss my behavior. I was twenty-six. Who was he to—

"What would you have done, Daniel?" Janelle's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts.

*What the hell was she talking about?*

"What are you talking about?" I asked, my voice dripping with the same nasty tone as my thoughts.

"If your dad was alone in the world, just existing and not enjoying his life, how would you feel?"

I knew where she was going. I tried to think of a way to derail her, but she didn't stop. She kept driving forward.

"You'd feel terrible for him. I know you would because you're caring, compassionate, and you love him. You'd do whatever you could to help him—and that's exactly what your dad is doing now for the son he loves more than life."

Her voice softened, but her words carried enough weight to draw the first tear from my eye. "We're just asking you to talk to Emily a few more times. The two of you worked great together before, and I really believe she can help you—not just with writing your books, but with living a full life. You deserve that, Daniel. And your father and I want that for you more than anything."

Damn it. She was right too. Why had I been so against calling Emily? She'd be more than happy to help. Just more

proof that I wasn't thinking clearly. With my dad and Janelle sitting in front of me, I felt an odd flicker of relief knowing there was hope—even if my father had approached Will with an ulterior motive.

“What does Mom say?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“She agrees with Janelle and me. She actually wanted to come with us today, but we thought it would feel too much like we were ganging up on you. So we'll save that for later,” he added, a small upward tug showing at the corners of his mouth.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt a genuine smile spread across my face. The muscles were stiff, as if they'd forgotten how to perform this simple act. It felt strange, but good.

“So I can expect a call from her tonight?”

“I'd say that's a definite yes,” my father replied, his eyes softening, a glimmer of hope reflecting back at me.

That night, my father and Janelle stayed for dinner, giving me a few precious hours that made me feel connected to the world again. I'd participated in countless virtual writing groups, online book club gatherings, and remote Q&A sessions with fans and other authors from the safety of my study. But being with people in person was an entirely different experience—one I remembered well and found myself beginning to long for again.

Even so, the fear still outweighed the desire. I couldn't yet imagine myself outside the house, navigating a social setting. But as the evening wore on, I found myself hoping my dad was right

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—that Emily could once again help me get out of my head and back into the world.

“Have you started your next series?” Janelle asked as she opened the just-delivered pizza box. The enticing aroma of cheese and pepperoni wafted through the air.

“No, not yet,” I admitted, sliding a slice onto my plate. “I’ve been keeping a journal like Gramp, and a few ideas have come from that,” I lied.

“That’s a great way to start,” my father said, nodding thoughtfully as he reached for a slice. “So, what do you think? Will it be based on reality, fiction, or a mix of both?”

“I’d like it to be based on real life with some creative license, of course, to keep the reader’s interest. Just like the last series.”

No one said a word, but the unspoken truth hung in the air: there wouldn’t be a single thing to write about if I didn’t start living a life—if I didn’t find the courage to step outside my door.

Little did we know, that was the furthest thing from the truth... and where the story truly begins.