

TRIGGER
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by Susan Vaught

Chapter 1

I have this dream where both legs work and both arms work and I don't have any scars on the outside. . . .

Dreams, no dreams, more dreams. On August 2, a Friday a few weeks after my seventeenth birthday, a little less than a year after I took a bullet in the head, I finally got to go home. Dreams. Good old Carter Brain Injury Center, my fourth and last hospital, was about to be history.

Carter wasn't much to look at, just five brick buildings in a circle around a paved driveway. There was a pool behind the therapy building (tiny) and gardens by all the front doors (neat). It was clean (sometimes), the rooms were white (usually), we got to have our own bedspreads (anything but white), and the therapists were perky.

Perky. That was a Dad-word.

Mom probably agreed about the therapists, but I didn't know for sure. Perky.

Mom wasn't much on words. Bank presidents focused more on numbers, according to Dad, who wasn't a bank president. When my parents came to pick me up, Mom didn't say much except *proud of you, honey*.

Example:

Hi, Mom. I got married.

Proud of you, honey.

She's a bank robber, and she has nine tattoos.

Proud of you, honey.

We're planning a crime spree, starting with you. Hand over that purse.

Proud of you, honey.

Sometimes she said it louder than others, and sometimes she even looked at me. Just try talking to Mom. I guarantee she'll be *proud of you*, too.

The day we found out I was getting discharged from Carter, Mom was proud of me for completing the program. Proud. I'd been excused from outpatient treatment, too, because I'd done so well. Proud. We'd have to go to counseling, but our first appointment wasn't for six months. The nearest outpatient doctor who took brain-injured patients was a hundred miles away with a long waiting list, but the Carter shrink thought we could handle the break. Shrink. Handle it. Proud. Like there was a choice. We were good to go. We could handle it. Proud, proud, proud. There was a big yellow banner over my door to prove it.

Up and forward, Jersey!

I kept staring at the banner like its green letters might turn red, but they didn't. If they had, and if I told somebody, I probably would have earned myself a few more weeks

of rehabilitation. Red. Proud. Up and forward. Or at least a bunch of tests and studies and stuff, to make sure the bullet didn't take more than my smarts, the vision in my right eye, and the strength on the left side of my body.

You're a lucky boy, Jersey Hatch

To my doctor, everyone was lucky. I had nightmares imagining a conversation between the doc and my Mom.

Your son's lucky, ma'am.

I'm proud of you, Doc.

Yep, he's a lucky boy, Ms. Hatch.

I'm proud of him, too, Doc.

Lucky.

Proud.

Lucky!

Proud!

Figured my dad had a great time at all those team meetings to review my progress. Never mind all the meetings deciding stuff about school and what kind of classes and help I'd need. I knew Dad had a great time getting Mom to visit me. She didn't much like coming to Carter. Even on the afternoon of my release, she came in for maybe ten minutes, then went to wait in the car until it was time to leave.

You've got to give her time, Jersey, the Carter shrink insisted. She's still distant because she needs to heal. So does your father. Lucky. He wanted me to work on insight, that shrink. Lucky. Proud. Said insight would be my biggest problem, except maybe paying attention to how other people feel, since the right side of the brain did all that, and

the right side of my brain had a big hole in it.

Insight. *You're like a five-year-old genius.* The shrink always tapped the side of his head when he said stuff like that. *Your intelligence—it's all there, but you don't have the social skills to use it.* Pragmatics, Mr. Hatch. *Focus on pragmatics!*

Insight. Pragmatics. Proud. Lucky. A hand patted my shoulder.

“You ready, son?” Dad’s voice seemed loud in the hallway.

Pragmatics. I’d looked up that word a bunch of times. Facts. Actual occurrences. Practical stuff. I managed a smile, but kept an eye on the green letters in the *Up and forward, Jersey!* banner, hoping they would turn red after all.

No such luck. Practical pragmatic fact. Insight.

Dad and I loaded my stuff in the car without too much trouble, and quick as that, I was in the back seat, strapped in tight. Mom started the car without revving the engine like Dad usually did.

“Is the house okay?” I asked as we drove away from Carter. Couldn’t help asking even though I’d asked a hundred times, because the worry wouldn’t leave me until I spit out the question. I hadn’t seen the house in so long I was afraid it would be gone.

“Yes, Jersey.” Dad sounded annoyed, but he flashed a giant grin. He was sitting directly in front of me in the passenger seat. If I turned my head and leaned a little, I could use my good eye to see his brown hair and brown beard stubble in the side mirror. His eyes—they were brown, too—darted from his window to the mirror. When he noticed I was staring at him, back to the window he went.

Mom, of course, said nothing as she drove. If she had, I was sure it would have involved the word “proud.”

I tried to stop thinking about the house so I wouldn't ask again. When I got nervous, it was harder to keep my mouth shut. The therapists all warned me about that, over and over. How much harder it would be outside of Carter. How much harder I'd have to try just to talk and think. Whatever. I'd try harder. But the house might have been gone because lots of things were gone. Like Todd Rush. He'd been my friend since third grade and he lived next door to us, but I hadn't seen him since. . .well, since Before. I forgot stuff, so I asked Dad to be sure Todd hadn't visited.

Dad said Todd and I hadn't been close for several months Before, but I couldn't remember that no matter how hard I tried. My fifteenth year got blown right out of my head, along with a lot of the time After—the time during my sixteenth year, when I'd been in rehab. Sometimes I dreamed things and thought they were memories. Other times I thought I was dreaming and it turned out to be real. Like the house. Had something happened to the house?

“Is the house okay?”

“The house is fine.” Dad's teeth clenched together in a pretend-smile. Silence from Mom. She might have been an automated Crash Test Dummy, except that she was driving.

Had she always been so quiet? Crash Test Dummy. I didn't remember her being quiet. I remember her being real funny and playing lots of jokes, but she hadn't done that in a long time. Dad and the Carter shrink kept telling me she got quiet when she found me.

After, I mean.

I didn't get that, because I wasn't dead and I didn't die, but to Mom, it must have

been a big deal, walking in on After.

Only I still wondered about Before and After. I wondered if I really got shot in the head. Maybe I was in a car wreck like most of the guys at Carter, the poster cube. When I first heard the nurses say “poster cube,” I couldn’t figure out what a poster cube was, but I kept looking for one, even after they told me to sit down, until the doctor gave me a shot because I couldn’t quit looking for that dumb cube, and trying to go home, to make sure the house was still there. Later on I found it they meant “post-acute.” Post-acute hospital, another kind of rehab. But I still didn’t know if the house was there and I kept worrying even though I didn’t have to find a poster cube.

“Is the house okay?”

Dad let out a groan, then pasted on his smile again. “It’s fine, Jersey.”

Poster cube.

“Oh.” I rubbed the scar on my right temple. “Sorry.”

“In the brain, out the mouth, I know, I know.” Dad glanced at me in the rearview.

“You’ve got your memory book, right? Want to write it down?”

I picked up the white binder off the car seat beside me, the one with “Hatch, Jersey” written in purple letters down the spine. Without much thinking about it, I flipped to a blank page, took the pen tied to the book by a dirty white string, and wrote, “HOUSE IS FINE MORON QUIT ASKING.” Then I left it on my lap without closing it. Didn’t do me much good closed. A memory book was one of the things I had to deal with after getting shot in the head. If I got shot in the head.

It could have been a car wreck. Most of the guys at Carter had been in wrecks, and lots of them had been drinking. Maybe I was drinking, and got in a wreck, and—did I

wreck the car into the house?

Before I opened my mouth, I glanced down at my book.

HOUSE IS FINE MORON QUIT ASKING.

“The house is fine.” My head tingled with relief. “The house is fine.”

Mom coughed. Dad coughed louder. Some sort of parent-cough-Morse code. I rubbed my scar and wondered why they didn’t just tell me to shut up like the Carter therapists did. Fine. Whatever. Harder on the outside. Harder out of the hospital. I had to try harder, so I told myself to shut up. Morse code. In fact, I pretended to stuff a sock in my mouth so I’d shut up. The sock usually lived in my head, right between my ears, muffling ideas when I tried to remember.

For example, we were on the road home, and I already couldn’t remember everything about leaving Carter. Only snapshots. This and that, and not always hooked together. I wrote most things down in my book like I was supposed to, so I turned back a page squinted at the pen-scrrawls.

It was my To-Do List. My Carter shrink made me do it.

1. *See Mama Rush and give her all the presents I made her.*
2. *Talk to Todd and find out why he hates me.*
3. *Pass the adaptive driver’s evaluation.*
4. *Make decent grades.*
5. *Take the ACT.*
6. *Get a girlfriend.*

Beside “Pass the adaptive driver’s evaluation,” my occupational therapist had written “Ha, ha, ha. Good one.” She wasn’t being mean. She just didn’t think I could handle being on the road with an occupational therapist and a physical therapist taking notes to make sure I had brain enough to drive. Besides, I’d failed it three times already, and now that I was out of Carter, it would cost \$500.00 to take it again. Harder on the

outside. Harder out of the hospital. I figured I'd get a chance once a year if I was lucky. Proud. Lucky. Proud. Lucky. House is fine moron quit asking.

Oh, and some of the guys wrote on Number 6, too, stuff like, "You're so dreaming, Hatch." I probably was, but I figured dreams were okay, so long as I didn't think they were real.

I looked at the opposite page, at the most recent entry before HOUSE-MORON.

August 1 3:00 pm: Said bye to Hank and Joey. Said bye to Alicia. Alicia gave me her ceramic duck. I made her take it back since it was her good luck charm.

Lucky. Proud. Lucky. Proud. Pragmatics, pragmatics, pragmatics.

The duck had felt cool and smooth in my hand.

I balanced the book on my knees and studied my fingers, remembering. Alicia held on to it all the time. It made her feel safe and happy. Would I have gotten shot in the head if I had a duck like that one? If I got shot in the head, I mean.

Did it hurt? Because I had this dream. . .no. Only a dream. But did I feel the bullet slam into my brain? In the dream, it burned and it hurt, so much. So, so much. Just a dream, right?

I gripped the sides of my memory book and squeezed. If got shot in the head, I bet nothing went through my mind, and it did hurt.

Maybe I had time to think, "Oh, shit."

My shrink told me I *shouldn't dwell on trauma like that*. And Carter taught me I wasn't supposed to curse under any circumstances.

Watch your mouth, Hatch, the occupational therapist would say. *That shit's in the past.*

Did I mention the occupational therapist could curse? Only the OT called it swearing. And she said I was supposed to do what she told me to do, not what she did. Pragmatics, Hatch. Don't forget pragmatics.

Quit goofing off, Jersey. Grip that ball if you want any of that hand back. Squeeze. Squeeze harder.

The brain has no sensation. That's why they keep people awake during some brain surgeries. After they saw through the skull, it's no big deal. Now squeeze the ball before I cram it up your nose.

Curl those fingers! What are you waiting for, an invitation? Up and forward, Hatch! Get with the program. The least you can do is get better so your parents don't have to wipe your butt.

Curl 'em, or I'll break your good hand. Squeeze that ball like it's a hammer about to fall on your nuts.

The hand-Nazi. I'd never forget her. Hell, she did a lot for me. Oops. Not supposed to curse. Up and forward. No swearing. Harder on the outside. I didn't need an occupational therapist any more. It was time to do things for myself. Proud. Lucky. I could have had a very good duck. Curl those fingers. Duck balls and hammers.

Pragmatics.

I was still thinking about hand-Nazis and nut hammers and wondering why my parents didn't talk to me like the therapists did when Mom drove up to a take-out window and bought us all an early supper. She drove us to Lake Raven, really close to my house, and we sat there in the car at the wide end of the lake to eat. I turned my head to the right a little, so I could see the water, all blue with waves and sunlight on top. There were

some benches close by, and a little two-rail safety fence. I'd been there a lot. I knew I had, only I couldn't really remember when, except for when I was lots younger, so I just stared at the water.

It took me forever to eat hot wings with one hand, and I couldn't really taste them that much, but I managed—and I didn't ask about the house a single time, not even when Mom started the car and got back on the road. Not even when she hit the blinker and steered the car into our neighborhood. Right away I noticed all the lawns were mowed up and down, like baseball fields. Neat, like our four-house cul-de-sac. Neat, like our two-story white house with black shutters.

HOUSE IS FINE MORON QUIT ASKING.

Proud. Lucky. Very good duck balls.

In a few seconds, I'd see the house for myself. I touched the messy circular dent in my throat. Tracheotomy scar. That's what happened when I couldn't breathe for myself. Some doc cut a hole in my neck and stuck a plastic tube through my trachea. The tube was hooked to a machine, and the machine pumped air into my lungs. In and out. Beep, click, hissss. Beep, click, hissss. I didn't remember that, but I learned about it at Carter. One of the therapists made me sit by a ventilator so I'd know what my parents had to go through the whole seventy-one days I wouldn't wake up. Beep, click, hissss.

You need to spend more time thinking about other people, Hatch. It's not all about you.

Beep, click, hissss.

Can you imagine this day after day? Seventy-one days? Can you?

Beep, click, hissss.

Focus on what I'm saying, what you're hearing. I want you to remember this. You can if you try. Apply yourself, Hatch. It's gonna be harder on the outside.

I rubbed a hand across my close cut hair and fingered the upside-down C on the left side of my head, where they cut open my skull and took out the bullet and a bunch of blood. The craniotomy scar had lost its swelling—gone pale—but it was still there, like the entry dent in my right temple.

You're a lucky boy, Mr. Hatch. It's a miracle you're only blind in one eye. A little higher, a little lower

It's a wonder you're alive, Mr. Hatch. An inch. Just an inch

Must have a purpose

Up and forward. . . .

God must have his eye on you

“God?” I laughed.

Dad stared at me in the mirror. Mom got stiffer behind the wheel.

“Oh. Sorry. Don't worry.” I gave them my best half-grin, which was all my mouth could do. Seeing myself in the rearview wasn't fun. “He didn't say anything. God, I mean. At least not that I heard. I was just thinking about proud and lucky and ducks and stuff. But not the house. Honest.”

Mom sighed as she pulled onto our short street. I let out a breath, too, because I was glad to see the house. It was still there and I hadn't been talking to God.

As we parked in the driveway, my fingers went from scar to scar. Did I really get shot in the head?

Would God care if I had?

The scars—but I didn't remember anything.

“Why?” Dad had asked a thousand times.

We'd covered it in family therapy at Carter over and over, the not remembering. The shrink explained I'd never remember getting shot—and probably not the year leading up to it, either. He said the gunshot wound was an open head injury, that it damaged my brain. Getting shot in the head was like unplugging a computer with nearly twelve months of data unsaved. The entries for those fifty or sixty weeks got fried. Gone. Poof. Most of my summer before my sophomore year, and the year itself. Fried.

Then I'd done eleventh grade in the hospitals, and now it was the end of summer before my senior year. Fried. Nobody from my school came to visit, so they didn't ask how I got shot. Nobody from outside school came to visit, so they didn't ask either. My parents finally quit asking. Fried. Oh, yeah, wait—Mama Rush, Todd's grandmother, came once during the third hospital, and she asked. But I don't think she believed me when I told her I didn't remember. Fried. In three weeks, I'd go back to school. Somebody probably would get around to asking that one question I couldn't answer, even for myself. Fried, fried, fried.

I struggled out of my seat belt, opened the car door, and got out, and I stood in our neat yard which had been mowed up and down like a baseball field. The house stared at me. I figured if it had eyebrows, the one above my window would have gone sliding halfway to the roof. Even the house wanted to know the answer to that one question I couldn't answer up and forward, down and backward, proud or lucky, very good duck or not.

Jersey Hatch, why did you shoot yourself?