Chapter 4: Echo Chamber

My mother had a taste for rage that came like weather—sudden, erratic, and damn near impossible to predict unless you had the instruments and patience of a seasoned storm chaser. Which, unfortunately, I did. From as early as I can remember, I’d trained myself like a behavioral seismograph: tuned to every microscopic twitch of her brow, every minuscule hitch in her breath that told me the ground beneath me was about to split open again.

To anyone else, there was “no warning.” But to me, there were flickers. A flash in her eyes that wasn’t quite right. A weird delay in her answers. The moment she started closing drawers a little too forcefully. The room would tighten. The air would get denser. Then—detonation.

The real betrayal was that I could never tell anyone how I knew. Because no one wanted to hear it. Not in the tone I would’ve used, which wouldn’t have made much sense anyway, since I’ve never been able to talk like other people. Not when it mattered.

See, I don’t hear words the way others do. Not immediately. They arrive in my ears as rhythms—cadences. Not language, but percussive nonsense: sound-bundles that I have to decode, echoing them in my skull until I find the shape of a word I recognize. Like hunting for a blurry face in a crowd and only realizing it's familiar after the person walks away. That’s what speech is to me. It’s never in time. Especially not when someone is yelling at me to answer right now.

The more aggressive they got, the less access I had to speech at all. My fallback became "I don’t know"—a sort of verbal white flag. But that phrase didn’t buy me peace; it just became the cue for escalation. Especially with her.

She would scream, “ANSWER ME,” and I’d be trying to rewind her last sentence in my head, match it to something I understood. But by then the grip would close around my arm, or the slap would land. And it was already too late.

The beatings weren’t isolated events. They were shifts in the atmosphere. They’d usually start after dinner—always earlier than bedtime, but never early enough to be predictable. A two-hour warm-up act of verbal carnage and pacing, then hands. Then maybe a break. She’d send me to bed when she ran out of stamina—but not forgiveness. Forgiveness never came.

An hour later, lights on. Door bursts open. And then—velocity.

Dragged out of bed. Thrown. Compressed. Bent. Choked. Twisted. Screamed into. Punched. Bitten. Yes, bitten. Like I wasn’t even human. Like maybe she knew something I didn’t.

Some nights I’d wake up bleeding, then be sent to school after a quick coat of concealer—if she had time. If not, she’d keep me home for a day or two so the swelling could go down and I could at least resemble a “normal” kid again. Whatever that was supposed to be.

More than once, I overheard her muttering curses at the bruises—not because she regretted causing them, but because now she had to deal with the evidence. She was furious that I made her hit me so hard that now she might get in trouble. That’s the math of madness: the victim is also the problem, the danger, the threat.

And yet somehow I remained loyal. Or maybe just too terrified not to be.

School was not a sanctuary. Far from it.

Kids could tell I was wearing makeup. They’d nudge each other, point, laugh. Some started calling me "Pretty Boy." Others leaned into more creative cruelty—suggesting I’d been beaten in some sexualized backroom encounter gone wrong. Apparently, in the minds of middle schoolers, a black eye on a boy could only mean deviant perversion.

I denied it, of course. That only made it worse. Because what’s more suspicious than a kid with obvious injuries who won’t “admit” to the fantasy they’ve invented for you?

None of them got it. None of them saw the desperation. The ribs that clicked when I breathed. The blood at the gumline when I smiled. They didn't want to see it.

At best, I was invisible. At worst, I was a punchline.

Honestly, I think some of them would've found it hilarious if I'd finally snapped and offed myself. Would’ve passed around rumors like trading cards, maybe made a joke about the body. That’s how it felt. Not rage, just—void. Emptiness where empathy should’ve been.

Only once did any adult intervene. Just one single goddamn time.

My mother broke her own pattern and brought me into school the morning after. No concealer. No cover-up. I looked like something out of a war documentary. And then, as if on cue, she boasted to the administrators about how she “had to beat the truth” out of me. Smiled while she said it. Like this was discipline and I was the delinquent.

I had the chance. Right then, I had the goddamn window open wide enough to crawl through and be free.

But I didn’t take it.

I lied for her. Lied my ass off. Claimed I fell. Said she was overreacting. Took the spotlight and turned it into a flashlight I shined into my own face. Made myself the problem. Made her the concerned mother of a troubled child.

And *she let me.*

That moment cost me everything. The adults never trusted me again. From that day forward, I was the boy who cried wolf in reverse: the boy who swore the wolf never touched him, even as blood ran down his neck.

The beatings didn’t stop. They just got quieter. More strategic. More surgical.

She never once thanked me for the protection I gave her. Never acknowledged that I took a fall to save her. Never noted that I continued to sit through classes and smile through teeth glued together with fear because I had lied to keep her out of a courtroom.

I never got to go back and tell the adults the truth…..

Because after a lie like that, no one listens to the second version.

Especially when you’re a kid.

A weird kid.