

## **Together Always** **Tony Romano**

After the fire in 1975, Mama would hug me tighter, as if afraid she was going to lose me too. I didn't mind. I was twelve. My twin brothers, Dominick and Anthony, five years younger, died in the fire, which took our house, and it was only natural that she would cling to me. Papa had already left with some woman a year before, Mama's family was an ocean away back in Italy. I was all she had.

That first year, she wanted to sit in our new apartment and stare vacantly at the walls, but I wouldn't let her. I dragged her to the bus stop, and we marched to Lincoln Park Zoo, Shedd Aquarium, the Museum of Science and Industry. I was determined to please her. I'd always been the one to please her, while Dominick and Anthony drove her to screaming. Even after Papa left, they continued to sucker punch each other and break Mama's precious vases and show her the bite marks they'd gotten on some arm or leg while they wrestled.

It was at the Field Museum, in the mummy exhibit downstairs, when I first saw them again. I was admiring Mama's hair as she read one of the placards, glad to see her curious, a trace of her old smile spreading shyly.

"Look," she said.

Beyond her, in the glass, I saw the reflection of two figures moving behind me. I turned, expecting to find some reasonable explanation for what I'd seen—a door easing shut, a shaft of sunlight pouring through some high window forming shadowy shapes—but there they stood, Dominick and Anthony. In my mind, they hadn't aged at all, but here they were, a year older. Their faces were longer, more defined. They weren't punching or biting each other. Arms folded, they simply glared at me. When I turned back to Mama, to shield her from them, I could see in the glass's reflection wisps of smoke curling above their hair, and then they were gone.

They appeared more often after that, at the most inopportune times. During a final exam. During a date. During my first job interview. Glaring, shaking their heads. Always aging, always five years younger, as if to mock me over what they could have been. Even at my retirement dinner they wouldn't leave me alone, their hair as gray as my own, though their flat eyes still retained a hint of their boyhood ferocity.

*You did this to yourself*, they would often say, not quite in unison.

I never told anyone about them, especially Mama. I didn't want to upset her. She'd suffered enough.

"I did it for her," I insisted, this time even before they appeared. I held Mama's hand at the hospice center. It was warm, but a thing unto itself now. She'd been unresponsive for days.

*You did it for yourself.*

Their voices were barely a whisper.

"I wanted to make her happy."

*You wanted her all to yourself.*

"You two made her miserable. Always fighting. She deserved a little peace and quiet."

*But a fire?*

"It was an accident."

*Don't you know? That's why we've been showing up all these years. So that you don't start believing your own lies. We want to make sure the truth rings clear. In your mind. Always. Which is why we never terrified you as we could have. We don't want you to go mad. Not yet.*

Mama tightened her grip.

"I only meant to please you, Mama. Which is why I never left. Why I never had a family of my own. I didn't think you could bear it."

But she couldn't hear me. I pushed aside a strand of her thin hair and curled it behind her ear. Her mouth opened as she clutched for air, one final breath, and then she was gone.

At the base of the porcelain lamp, I saw their reflection. I turned, and Mama was with them now. The three of them together. For eternity, I thought. Disappointment filled her eyes. A mother's disappointment in her son.

"I only wanted to please you, Mama...Mama?"

But I knew—*dear God*—I knew I was alone.