



KILL SWITCH

a **SPARK** story

rachael craw



WALKER
BOOKS

TOMMY

The restroom light burns like the holiness of God and Tommy squints. He knuckles his eyes. “Oh, Jesus.” He trembles, blinking wetly at the white blur of his shirt in the mirror, his pale skin, his fair hair, the spotlight above him a gauzy halo. He’s surprised that his pupils aren’t smoking in the glare, they’re so dilated, the blue swallowed whole. He presses his face to his palms, rasps the stubble on his jaw. Closing his eyes only amplifies the static in his head, the electric pins and needles in his spine.

He counts back. Six days. The symptoms are definitely worse.

Steps in the passage. Tommy jerks upright and lunges to secure the lock, bruising his fingers as it snaps and clatters to the floor. Screws poke headless from the hinge. The handle turns. Shit. He jams his foot against the door and strains to control his voice. “Sorry!”

“Hurry up, you useless bastard, we’ve got customers.” Bryce.

Heat rushes up his body, adrenalin like a flash flood cramping his muscles. Bryce rattles the door before shuffling away, his mutters fading. Tommy groans and stumbles back to the sink, careful with the faucet, not wanting to break that too. He cups his hands to splash his face.

Cold water used to help when the adrenalin surged. If pins and needles got bad, he went for a run. Deep breaths dulled roaring static. For three months he had managed the symptoms without drawing attention. Sure, Bryce gave him a verbal warning and his mom noticed snapped window latches and broken door handles but Tommy’s not the only crappy waiter at Lourdes and his folks’ place is old, falling apart. But none of the tricks work anymore, not since the seizure, and it panics him.

He wipes his face on his apron and blinks. No change. His eyes still ache, his ears still roar, and his heart stamps in his chest. Bryce will fire his ass, for sure.

Kitchen sounds echo through the wall, the chink of glassware, china, knives and forks, laughter rising and dying, and beyond that he imagines the gravel in Bryce's voice, cursing him up one side and down the other. Bryce could replace him in three seconds flat even this late in the summer. Plenty of high school grads, like Tommy, slope in daily with their laser-printed resumes and mouths full of above and beyond work ethic bullshit.

Tommy came with that and a plan: make enough to get out of his folks' place and into a loft, maybe Williamsburg, wherever. Gabe says he can hook him up; a space with great light where he can lay out his boards, room for an easel. Somewhere to bring a date home ... maybe a model. Gabe drips models, girls who can't wait to take their clothes off for him, dreaming of being immortalised in paint then immortalised in sheets. Tommy might not have an Irish accent, rock star looks and gallery exhibitions drawing names, dollars and art world clout but he has paint under his nails and that's a start.

His stomach churns, tightening to a knot behind his navel. He grips the sink. Please, not now.

Light feet in the hall and a tap on the door. "Tommy?"

"Give me a sec."

The handle turns. He doesn't bother to try to stop her; Laney won't leave him alone, even if he says. Her face appears around the door, chestnut ponytail, brown eyes big and round, pink mouth pinched. She slips inside, making the space cramped which says more about the size of the room than the size of Laney; she's compact, tight curves, and looking at her makes his mouth water, even when he's losing it.

"Babe, you need to sit?" She touches his face, the sensation almost too much – like he's all nerve endings.

He keeps his head down. "I just need a minute."

"Did you go to the doctor? You said you'd go to the doctor."

"Haven't had a chance."

"Bryce is gunna go apoplectic."

"I know."

She strokes his back, silky and slow.

"Not helping, Laney."

"Well, if we're in here," she velvets her voice and presses her pelvis, stomach, breasts against him, her hot mouth to his ear.

"I'm due for a break."

"Table four," he chokes. "Are they still there?"

Her hand stops between his shoulder blades. "Table four? I don't know."

"Can you check?"

"You're hiding?"

"Can you just check?" He straightens up, squinting against the light.

She frowns. "What have you taken?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit, your pupils are huge."

"It's nothing." He rubs his eyes. A nauseating tug behind his navel.

"Please can you just check?"

"Bryce is going to fire you."

"I know."

She puts her hand on his chest, fans her fingers, sighs and slips out.

Table four.

Six days ago, a crowd of suits clogged the booth by the window, loud guys, not a smile between them, elbows on the tablecloth, collars loose. Tommy could barely see straight as he took their orders, dizzy, heart racing, pins and needles amping. Collecting up menus, he brushed hands with the small guy, the one with the squashed face, pocked and pillowing jowls. Barely a half inch of skin-to-skin contact and BOOM.

He woke on the floor of the store room, thanks to Bryce, away from the diners so his seizures wouldn't give them indigestion. Apparently, he'd wet himself, writhed, foamed at the mouth and covered himself in vomit. Laney had knelt beside him, whispering doom, epilepsy, tumours, words thick with worry. He'd lain shelled to a husk, static buzzing, one face tunnelling his brain: the guy from table four.

A knock and Laney's back in the doorway, nodding, frowning. "Still there."

He swears, pressing his knuckles to his head. Not a hallucination or trick of insomnia, then. Since the seizure, his broken sleep is blood-soaked hell. Nightmares like he's never experienced before, a visceral glut of violence, sensation so real, so goddamned real beneath his fingertips, in his nostrils, in his mouth, that he screams himself awake. Always the guy from table four, broken neck, or slit throat, or caved skull, a different death each time but always dead and always him and Tommy there trembling in the aftermath of breaking, slitting or caving, the stink of death on his hands, but in the split seconds before his swelling scream wakes him, an exquisite moment of peace, rightness, order, when he feels whole.

"Is it the same guys? Here for their comp meals after ..." Laney says. "You don't need to be embarrassed, you've got nothing to be ashamed of."

He groans. This girl saw him rolling on the floor in his own urine and vomit and she still wants him?

"Listen," she says. "We'll swap. I'll take the front tables and you take the back corner. Bryce won't care."

"Won't he?" Bryce fills the corridor behind her.

Laney almost jolts into Tommy.

"Get back to work," Bryce barks at her and she has to squeeze past him because the bastard won't move, waiting for the boob or butt graze. She goes with the butt; at least she doesn't have to look at his leering face.

Bryce lost everything early: hair, waist, humanity. At thirty-five he has the face and compassion of a cinder block. "If you're going to start pissing and puking in my restaurant again ... what the hell is wrong with your eyes?"

"I don't know ... I came in here ... I thought if I could ..."

"Give me your apron." His meaty hand thrusts out. "I've had enough of this bullshit. You said you were okay. You're not okay. I should never have let you come back. You've cost me a frigging fortune in comp meals after your episode the other night and this isn't a frigging charity."

As clear as if he's watching a movie, Tommy pictures himself snapping Bryce's neck, the whiplash strike of his arms, muscles contracting, the convulsion of Bryce's body before he falls to the floor a slack mountain of flesh. The vision dies and Tommy's tugging numb-fingered at his apron strings, and before he knows it he's out in the alley, Bryce's parting words rising with the stink from the dumpster beside him.

He zips his black jacket viciously to his throat, injustice frying his synapses. He has oil paints and canvases to buy from Dowers and no pay coming. Bryce, his job, the anarchy of his body, churns inside him, smearing at the edges, boiling down into a slick of rage. All he can think about is the guy from table four and the poisonous pulse in his stomach.

He stumbles to the mouth of the alley, grateful at least for the dark; his eyes don't ache out here though the clarity frightens him. He lifts his face to the night, lets the drizzle hit him, tries to breathe deeper, calm himself. He's being irrational. It's not table four guy's fault. He's just ... a guy. What does Laney call it? Projecting ...

Thunder erupts in Tommy's chest.

He collapses against the wall of the restaurant, grinding his shoulder, gasping for air, static roaring. The knot in his stomach lashes like it's attached to an invisible cord. He buckles, moaning, and presses his face to the brickwork.

He feels him in there, table four guy, mere inches of wall separating them ... Nightmare images flood in, vivid, toxic.

Convulsions roll through him; something switches in his head. Tommy tumbles into darkness and he's ripped open somehow, spilled out with certainty. The fear that makes him shake and sweat, the polluted dreams, the symptoms, it's because of table four guy. He knows it ... a bone-deep, marrow of his goddamned soul knowing ... and he feels somehow picked out to know it, entrusted, prepared like some kind of disaster warning system has been jacked up in his DNA and the last three months has been gearing to this ... paring him back to synaptic receptors so when he touched table four guy he went off like an alarm.

No wait, that's not ... that can't be ... He shakes his head, fighting off dizziness. But he is right. He is. The intensity of it swells his throat and pricks his eyes because it's unbearable and he's alone in his knowing and the weight of responsibility bears down on him, compressing his lungs and he gasps to breathe. He's tapped poison in one touch and it pulses at him now. Evil.

Hang on. That's not ... Streetlight stabs his eyes, he winces, stumbles backward and braces himself on the wall, panting, waiting for the fog to clear ... He's in an alley, like the one by Lourdes. It's raining, like when he left work. Same clothes, black jacket zipped to his throat. Warm night air. Then he freezes ... He feels table four guy drawing closer, hears a stumbling erratic step, mutters, swearing.

Tommy panics. He's not ready! He hasn't decided!

He squeezes his head and backs behind a green dumpster, rust, rot and old meat grown rank in its belly, his mind scrambling ... then he remembers ... that sweet impossible relief at the end of his nightmare, after the struggle, after the breaking or slitting or caving, though the dark work makes him recoil, the peace at the end is the promise.

Certainty surges through him.

But he's not ... he can't ...

What if he does nothing and table four guy infects someone else? He'd be complicit. Tommy squares his jaw.

The sound of heaving, a wet splatter; the guy must be emptying his stomach, Bryce's seafood chowder or poached duck or mushroom risotto, comp meal puke. Tommy shakes with the impulse to step out ... fight his fear ... do right.

A new sound.

Light feet in the alley, shoes splashing, unhurried, the dull thud of something wet slapping the dumpster, a tapping, electronic beeping, a phone.

He presses himself against the wall.

A woman stops in the middle of the walkway, tall, slender, dressed in black, dark hair pulled into a sleek ponytail. She closes her phone and slips it into the pocket of her fitted jacket and turns to look at Tommy. Porcelain skin, freckles dusting nose and high cheek bones. Beautiful, that mouth, those dark eyes, black as his ... black like his ...

A pucker in her brow, brief regret, then her stare hardens to granite.

Warning flares in his chest. Fight and flight like monstrous clashing cymbals, a rending clarity: her intent opposes his. He feels it rolling off her in devastating waves, her need to defend, to protect table four guy.

His terror rises with the threat.

“Don’t try to run,” she says.

Raw instinct takes over. Tommy’s a wrecking ball, swinging at her. She ducks the blow like it’s nothing, like he’s nothing, and he knows she wants to kill him. He launches forward, but she sees it coming and stands up under him, flipping his legs towards the narrow stretch of night sky.

He spirals through space and time, astounded, landing like a miracle on his feet, bolting blindly through the sudden gap. He feels her behind him, fast like him, wild like him, dark need driving her like him. A battered metal canteen catches his eye, jagged at the edge where it lies ripped open. He scoops it up and flings it back at her, not looking to see it hit. The flood of adrenalin propels him toward the body slumped against the wall.

Table four guy.

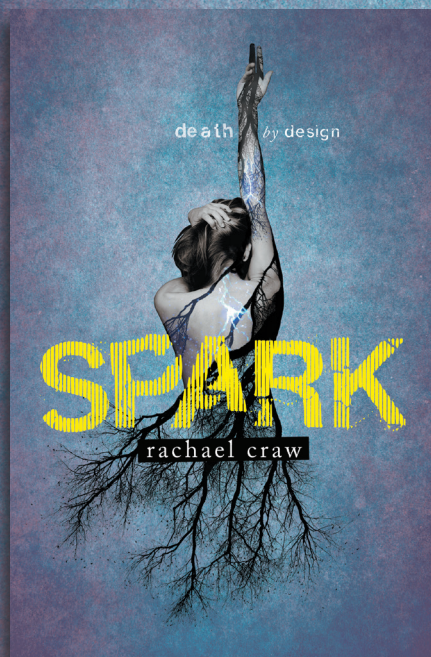
A last chance charge.

And he’s thinking about Laney, and his mom, and a loft, and paint and models he’ll never meet because of him sitting there in his own vomit ... then her arms slip round his neck and shoulder, smooth at first, like an embrace, her body, hard and strong as she pulls him out of his stride, jerking his head. Pain, hot and black.

A snap.

**"You think God has a
loophole for people who
don't have a choice?"**

**Jamie shrugs.
"Hope so, otherwise
we're screwed."**



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