

I

When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies?

—Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote

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Alex woke with a jolt, catching a scream in her mouth. She stared unseeing at a dingy white ceiling as the images in her mind receded like a bloody tide.

She squirmed against the thin, wet fabric clinging to her body, dread coiling in her chest as she found her forearms and ankles clamped in large brown leather cuffs with yellowed cotton lining.

Shit, she thought. Not again.

She took a trembling breath and slowly turned her head. Dust motes drifted in light straining through a thick, shatterproof window, barely illuminating the wall clock covered with chicken wire, caging time as only this place could. She knew the tiny room well—state hospitals all seemed to use the same interior decorator.

Alex balled her hands into fists and took several deep breaths, trying to slow her racing heart.

A pocket-sized man in a long white coat and glasses walked in carrying a file so thick it could only be hers. His long nose and the way he tilted his graying head at Alex made her think of a small bird. A woman as large as he was small followed behind, wearing gray scrubs and an exaggerated frown. She loomed behind him like a brick wall.

“Hello, Alexandra. I’m Dr. Wilcox, a relatively new attending physician

here at Manhattan Psychiatric. This is Nurse Parry. Good to have you with us. How are you feeling?"

"How long have I been here?" Alex asked, her voice cracking.

"Before I answer that, we need to check your vitals. I understand from your file you don't like to be touched. May we proceed if we wear gloves?"

Alex nodded and forced her hands to relax, already longing for her own gloves and the barrier they put between her and the world.

Dr. Wilcox sat next to her and shined a penlight into her eyes, then put two of his fingers onto her wrist.

"How long?" Alex asked.

Dr. Wilcox kept his fingers on Alex's wrist, watching her face carefully. "You've been unconscious for three days," he said. "It's Wednesday."

Alex was sure the doctor felt her pulse quicken. *Three days*. It had been years since she'd been out for so long.

"Well, that super sucks," she said. Dr. Wilcox gave a thin-lipped smile and gestured for the nurse to unlock the restraints. Alex rubbed her wrists and sat up slowly, lowering her legs over the edge of the bed. Her long brown hair plastered itself to her back as the hospital gown gaped.

"I've been in contact with your psychiatrist, Dr. Arnold," Dr. Wilcox said. "She said once you came out of your catatonic state to give you these." From an inside his coat he pulled a plastic grocery bag containing some wadded-up fabric. Alex's spirits lifted at the sight of her crumpled arm-length gloves. It took all her strength not to yank them out of his hands.

"It's highly irregular, but she was quite insistent that they were part of your treatment," he said.

"Thank you so much," she said, clutching the bag to her body and sending Dr. Arnold warm thoughts. She smiled, trying to seem as sane as possible. "Can I go home now?"

He looked at her for a long minute. "I'm afraid you've had several violent fits these last few days. I'd like to keep you in observation for an additional seventy-two hours."

Oh god, no, she thought. The room immediately began to close in on her. "Dr. Wilcox, please. I just really need to get home and back to work."

"I'm sorry, but I've read your file and it's unclear to me whether you are a danger to yourself or not." He gestured with the demoralizingly thick folder. "You've had a surprising number of stays with us and other hospitals in your thirty-two years."

“But—”

“The time will go faster if you just accept it and try to understand. We are doing it for your own good,” he said briskly.

Alex felt the familiar pull of the quicksand she was suddenly in. Struggle, and the days could turn into weeks, or worse.

“You were brought here as-is from the ER,” he said. “So we’ll give you some hospital-issue clothes to wear. You and I will talk again toward the end of your stay.”

Alex nodded and they left. The door wasn’t even closed before she tore open the bag and pulled on her sleek arm-length black gloves, her heart calming as she filled each finger.

Nurse Parry barged back in with a pile of white clothes, shoes, and a hair elastic, all of which she tossed on the bed. “I’ll wait outside,” she said in a voice like sandpaper.

Alex peeled off the sodden gown and put on the hospital clothes and ugly white plastic sandals. The scratchy, overly bleached fabric notwithstanding, it felt good to be dressed. She pulled her sweaty hair into a messy bun, grateful to have it off her neck.

When she opened the door, Nurse Parry snorted at seeing the chic gloves in stark contrast to the drab hospital clothes. She pointed down the hall. “Shower facilities are down this hall to your right. Rec room is to your left. Lunch is in an hour and a half. Follow the crowd when the bell rings.” With that, she was gone.

Alex headed to the rec room. The large space had a few ratty loveseats and chairs in front of an old, corner-mounted TV, and a set of green tables with benches. Patients of varying lucidity were strewn around the room playing games, watching shows, or just staring at nothing. The fluorescent lights buzzed in her ears and down her spine. *Seventy-two hours.*

A door opened on the opposite side of the room, giving her a glimpse of greenery. Alex dashed over, desperate for fresh air. She found an empty bench underneath a row of trees standing sentry along the perimeter, not quite hiding the high stone walls, and certainly not providing shade from the irritatingly cheery September sun.

She put her head in her hands and allowed herself a moment of wretchedness before closing her eyes and beginning the mantra her grandmother had taught her for when she was scared or upset. *Breathe in...I’m okay...breathe out...there’s nothing I can do. Breathe in...breathe out.*

She reached back in her memory to three days ago, trying to recall the events that had brought her here.

She'd been called in on her day off and remembered being startled by the furor of activity in a typically quiet mortuary. Theirs was the morgue/mortuary nearest to New York's Chief Medical Examiner's office, and on high volume days they often got the overflow once the city had performed an autopsy.

It had clearly been a rough few days for New York.

Her boss had rushed up and shoved a pile of files at her. "Thank you for coming. I made sure you had your end table."

Alex took the pile. "Thanks...but this looks like more than 'a couple'."

He had the decency to look a little sheepish as he shrugged. "Well, you're the fastest and the best." She gave him a flat look, feeling foolish for letting him yet again take advantage of her lack of family and social life. But it kept her busy.

Alex headed to the far side of the large morgue to her station, where she exchanged her black silk gloves for rubber surgical ones. Then pulled the first body—a middle-aged man killed in a car accident—out of a refrigerated locker and onto a gurney. After using pulleys to transfer him to the table, she walked to the left side, intentionally putting her back to the rest of the room.

Alex looked at him for a moment, taking in his salt-and-pepper hair and shaggy eyebrows. There was a reason she'd chosen a career full of corpses. For a woman afflicted with visions, the dead were safe—no future, no present, only a past. And post-mortem visions usually only took a few minutes, though she'd learned the hard way to try to get them over with before she had a scalpel in her hand.

She pulled off a glove and gently touched the man's cold, clammy cheek.

A light flashed.

Images flowed into her mind—*a child at his mother's funeral...at college, partying, philandering...working at a corporate job...laughing with a wife and children...sneaking off to gamble, taking money out of their kids' college account...arguing with his wife, humiliated and angry...a fateful car ride and a patch of ice...blackness.*

Alex took a deep breath as the final images receded. Most lives seemed to be made up of a simple cadence, interspersed with intense beats of joy or sorrow. It was these beats that primarily showed themselves to Alex, though the intensity varied, and some had more than others.

Relieved to have that part done with, she began her work. Before long he

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was clean, embalmed, and dressed, with special care given to his makeup and hair, combing it the way she knew he used to do it.

Alex pulled out her next body—a young woman, late-twenties, killed in an assault. She gasped quietly when she pulled back the sheet, not at the serrated gash across the neck, but at the tattoo on her face. It seemed to be a mask of sorts, with widening and thinning lines in a beautiful inky pattern of scroll-work that framed her eyes, swirling across her forehead, down her temple and over her cheekbones. It was markedly different from the gang-related facial tattoos she was accustomed to seeing. Alex pulled her glove off and hesitantly touched the young woman's cheek.

A massive, brilliant light had exploded in her mind.

And she woke up here.

A shadow covered the sun as Alex remembered that moment of panic before becoming lost in the intense, monstrous vision. At the thought, blood and screams began to surface and fear pulsed through her. She shoved it back down.

Not yet, she thought. She'd likely be forced to see it again soon enough.

A well-worn feeling of helplessness settled over her. At least it wasn't a vision from someone living, someone who would soon face such a horrifying fate. Grateful for that small mercy, she turned her face to the sun and let the light and warmth seep into her. *Breathe in...I'm okay...breathe out...there's nothing I can do.*

There was nothing *anyone* could do. She was cursed. No matter what she did, no one ever believed her.

But Alex's visions always came true.