

WYRDWOOD

Welcome #1

Stalking the Moon

Angel Leigh McCoy

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IMPORTANT

This free download is a preview of the full novel and contains only the first nine chapters. If you enjoy it, I hope you will read the full novel and stick with the series. Welcome to Wyrddwood!

CONTENT WARNING

This novel contains discussions about suicide and descriptions of graphic violence, psychiatric treatment, and self-harm that may be triggering to some readers.

[What is the Wyrddwood Project? Learn more.](http://wyrddwoodangel.com/about/) (<http://wyrddwoodangel.com/about/>)

DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this novel to two important Geminis in my life. This novel, being the first I will publish, is especially important to me considering I've wanted to be a novelist since childhood. I undertook writing my first novel in sixth grade, and I have a huge stack of unfinished manuscripts. Life, as we all know, gets in the way of our dreams. My mother was the first to encourage me to write. She instilled in me the belief that I could be a writer. And so, this book is dedicated to her memory, to the boundless love she gave, and the lessons she taught. Miss you, Mom.

I also dedicate it to Fran Friel, a Gemini like my mother, who is an amazing creative and old soul who has influenced me in ways she will never know. Her friendship, the intellectual discussions, the tools she introduced me to, and just the general light of her being have inspired me to finally follow through on that childhood dream. Thank you, Fran.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly, I'd like to say a little something about mental illness. I use it in this book as a vehicle to carry the story, but I've attempted to do so with great respect toward those who deal with it in real life. It is not my intention to make light of it.

Mental illness can and does destroy lives. If you feel that you're ill, I encourage you to seek help. No shame, no blame.

I've included some links to excellent organizations at the end of the book.

Sincerely, Angel...



Stalking the Moon

by Angel Leigh McCoy

CHAPTER 1

"Surrealism had a great effect on me because then I
realized that
the imagery in my mind wasn't insanity. Surrealism
to me is reality."

—John Lennon—

Driving my yellow Fiesta, singing at the top of my lungs with Pink, I cut through the city then turned off the highway onto the rural roads that would take me back to my workplace—the Vince Malum Residential Living Center, home of Peoria's non-violent socio- and psychopaths.

Once a week, I had an appointment with my psychiatrist—Dr. Richard Reuter. Richard was my head shrinker. I'd been seeing him regularly for twenty years. At times, it felt like we'd grown up together, although the age difference (more than fifteen years) made that a silly fantasy.

Richard kept an office in the Center's main building, where my mom, Gisèle Rose, had been a resident for more than twenty-five years. Mental illness was the Rose legacy. Being her daughter, I hadn't fallen far from the tree. In Mom's absence, I'd been raised by my grandfather, Abraham "Abram" Rose.

Along the field-lined road, the Center appeared in the distance. The roof on the original Victorian stone house and the top two floors of the twin residential wings peeked over the treetops. A German immigrant named Vince Malum had built it for his schizophrenic wife in 1927 and named it the Morning Glory Institution, "a home for people in discord with the world."

Before long, there were more patients than rooms, so Malum built an addition at the back of the main house. Everyone called it the Tower. The patients lived in the Tower—men in the west wing, women in the east—and the doctors, such as Richard, had their offices in the main house. When Malum died, his grandchildren renamed the place in his honor.

I guided the car down the paved drive between the apple, cherry, and pear trees in Malum's Orchard. At harvest-time each year, when the trees were heavy with fruit, people came from all over and were free to pick as much as they wanted, so long as they gave ten percent of their harvest to the Center. The people got free fruit, and the Center got free pickers. Sometimes, whole families descended upon the orchard. They looked happy and normal with their ladders and baskets.

Abram and I had climbed up into those trees every summer, back when we were still trying to look happy and normal, back before I learned that my mother was locked away inside an institution. I remembered looking over at the Center's dark windows, glimpsing movement, and wondering who was inside. Sometimes a pane of glass would catch a ray of sunlight and reflect it with a wink. It chilled me even on the warmest summer days.

The main gate was an enormous iron monstrosity. People said Malum shipped it over from Germany and that it had once been the gate on a concentration camp, although no one had ever proved that.

The fence around the Center's land was not designed to keep anyone out—or even in. It was a mental blockade, intended primarily to discourage restless patients from wandering. An able-bodied patient determined to run away could scale the fence with relative ease. The Center relied instead on the vast acres of farmland surrounding it to keep escapees from succeeding, and it was rare that they had to send out search parties. Out there in the middle of nowhere, there wasn't much traffic and nowhere to go but into the corn fields.

I pulled up to the security box and swiped my employee badge across it. The gate opened, and I drove through the moment it was wide enough.

The main house had climbing ivy, gables, manicured shrubs, and a circular drive. It was a wannabe English manor. Some days, I appreciated the sight of it. Others, it repulsed me. As I approached, I found my feeling sentimental about the old place. It was, after all, my second home.

The staff entrance was on the women's wing, near the employee parking lot. Out of habit, I entered there. Nurses, orderlies, and doctors all greeted me as I made my way to Richard's office.

Richard was seated at his desk. "Hey, Vivi. Come on in." He rebuttoned the collar of his white, custom-fitted dress shirt.

"Howdy." I shut the door behind me and went to the leather couch. It was overstuffed with a high back and deep seat. I felt small on it, but that was part of Richard's evil plot. Plus, it would have been impossible to fall off it while under hypnosis. It cradled me.

"What part of my psyche are we going to poke today?"

Richard folded his arms on the desk, a pen flapping in one hand as he looked me over. "I want to revisit your early days," he said. "I've been going through the transcripts of our sessions, compiling them, and there are a couple things I'd like to revisit."

"Let's get to it then."

The first time I met Richard, back in *the early days*, he was finishing his last year as a graduate student in the Psychology Department at the University of Illinois. He was in Peoria doing an internship at the counseling center, and Abram had dragged me there to get my head fixed—at the junior high principal's request.

Back then, Richard had a long ponytail and was every teenage girl's dream of the older college boy. I was only thirteen, and he was taller than me, though that changed when I had my growth spurt a few years later.

Thirteen-year-old Me had gone into his office with a chip on my shoulder, hating Abram, hating my illness, and hating Dr. Richard Reuter before I'd even met him.

He'd appeared in the waiting room and asked, "Viviane? Right? Would you come with me?"

"I don't got a choice."

Abram hissed, "Hey," at me, and said "Be nice."

"Yeah, sure."

I walked into the office and went straight to a chair, flopped there, and crossed my arms on my chest. The first thing I noticed that interested me was the plate of cookies on the coffee table. They were chocolate chip and appeared homemade. I pretended not to see them. I didn't want him to think I was going to stay all that long, and besides, my stomach didn't feel too good.

Richard sat in the chair opposite me and watched me for a full minute. Finally, he asked, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen." It was a bold-faced lie.

"I know you're lying."

I asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Are you a fag?" I said with vehemence, calculating his possible reactions.

He didn't even flinch. "Viviane, do you know why your grandfather brought you here?"

"Because he's a sociopath afraid of being noticed. I draw attention to him, and he wants me to stop."

He smiled at that, and for the first time, but not the last, I thought how handsome he was.

In that first session, he didn't hypnotize me, though later, it became a regular part of our therapy sessions. Richard felt it was the best way to track down the source of my hallucinations. He would take me back to the time before my first hallucination, and we'd go over the events of a day or two in each session, gradually working forward through my memories. It was my own personal reality-TV show.

Twenty years later, I was thirty-three, and our regressions were catching up to the conscious flow of time. In the hypnosis sessions, he recorded my soul in bits and pieces, saved forever as audio recordings, transcribed to digital documents, and printed out on paper. He kept the files in his cabinets.

I'd often wondered what would happen when we finally caught up to the present moment. Maybe I'd die. Maybe he'd die. Maybe the entire world would end as the Ouroboros swallowed its own tail.

"All right." Richard got up from his desk. "I'm ready, if you are." He sat in the chair opposite me and leaned forward to turn on the metronome.

I said, "Take me to a happy day."

"You know the drill. Close your eyes, relax, and remember."

Not every tick and tock of the metronome sounded the same. The differences were subtle, but they were there if I listened for them. It was a song without rhyme or reason.

It started small and distant: *tick*.

The cuckoo clock on the wall at Abram's house had to be wound. I loved pulling the chains

that raised the heavy, metal pine cones. *Tock*. It had been my job, every morning, when I was a kid. My body rocked to the beat: *tick tock*. Time ebbed, and space flowed. My spine relaxed. *Tick*. Gravity released me. *Tock*. The metronome sang its song in my belly. *Tick tock*. I was energy, and I radiated.

"We're going to continue our journey back in time," Richard said. The waves of his voice rippled through me, and the present faded into the background.

I followed the metronome down into a trance. We had a signal. I raised a finger to indicate that I was ready to begin.

"Go back," Richard suggested, "to the moment when you first met Simon, when you were thirteen."

The scene formed around me, inside me, throughout me.

"Describe it to me."

I'm home, and I'm taking a shower. There's blood running down my leg. It's swirling in the water and spinning down the drain. I know what it is. Lettie's had hers since last year, and she took me to buy the stuff I'd need. I'm really glad I didn't have to do that with my grandpa.

Lettie and me, we read the little instruction book that came in the box and made fun of the pictures. She warned me how it would be, the cramps and mess, but it's worse when it's actually happening. It's scary and weird. I keep thinking that my blood is supposed to stay in my body.

So, I'm standing there in the shower, watching my blood drain away, and I'm trying not to cry, wondering if I'm going to die, and that's when I hear a man. He sounds like James Bond. "You're probably not going to die."

I scream and cover my private parts with my hands, but no one's there.

The voice says, "What I mean is, you are going to be just fine." But nobody's there. I'm freaking out. I jump out of the shower and run through the house. I'm screaming.

The voice is following me. "Oh, lass, it's okay."

I streak into the kitchen, and my grandpa is there, trying to calm me down.

I'm crying, naked and wet, shaking all over, blood staining my leg, and Grandpa thinks I'm upset because of my period, but that isn't it. It's the man talking to me right next to my ear, when there's nobody there.

He says his name is Simon.

The metronome sang. *Tick. Tock.*

"When you return to your waking state," Richard said, "you'll remember all the events you described to me, clearly and in detail."

Tick.

"Feel the couch supporting you. It's solid and real. Feel the air as it passes through your nostrils. You're here with me, now, in the present." *Tock.*

I opened my eyes and looked across at Richard's familiar face.

He turned off the metronome. "How do you feel?"

I answered with a nod. When I wake up and remember everything even more clearly than before, I'm reminded of my own life again, as if I've been looking through an album of old pictures.

"Are you hungry? Want to grab dinner?"

"Not tonight. I want to spend some time with Colin before I go see Mom. Rain check?"

"Yeah, some other time." Richard got up and went to his desk. "How's Colin doing?"

"Best fiancé ever."

"Great. See you next week."

I'd been dismissed.



After my appointment, I went straight back home to our one-story, two-bedroom, three-mortgage house and found my grandfather cooking lunch in the kitchen.

"Want some eggs?" Dressed in jeans and a mustard-stained Chicago Cubs t-shirt, Abram loomed over the stove.

"Love some."

"Did you take your medicine?"

I sighed. "Jesus. Here we go again. Not yet. I'll take them with lunch."

"Good." Abram waved his hand at the coffee pot. "There's coffee." He served up the eggs. "So how's that crazy young man of yours?"

"Fantastic in bed."

Abram grunted. "It only gets worse from here, you know."

"Do we have to have this conversation again? It's as outdated as your flat-top. I love Colin, and that's the end of it."

Abram set a plate of eggs in front of me. "Okay. How was your session with Richard?"

"Fine." I dashed hot sauce onto my eggs. And that was the extent of the conversation. Most of them were some variation on that theme, the questions and answers in different orders. By then, Abram and I weren't exactly close.

CHAPTER 2

Several hours later, I got a call from Colin's doctor, Bella Rosenblum, asking me to come back to the Center. An orderly had found Colin out on the roof, a dangerous place for a man suffering from delusions and hallucinations. He'd been confined to his room and put on suicide watch.

I climbed to the Center's roof, four stories up, and looked out at the manicured lawn and down at the concrete patio. An eager wind blew from the northwest, sweeping in off the Illinois plains and pushing cumulus clouds ahead of it. It whipped my loose hair into a frenzied halo and dried my tears.

I wanted to understand—to see what he'd seen when he'd been standing there.

Two years earlier, I'd met Colin at the Center. We were in the garden, me with my mother and a book, and Colin with his ghosts. He'd been diagnosed with retrograde amnesia. He had forgotten his name and his history—everything from before he woke up in the hospital.

Our relationship started when my bookmark went dancing across the lawn on a gust of wind, and Colin retrieved it for me. We started talking, and that led to walks, then picnics, and eventually we kissed beneath an old oak. We built dreams and plans around a future when his memories would return, when we could get married and have children.

As time had progressed, Colin's past remained elusive, haunting him. He presented with hallucinations and delusions that led the Center's doctors to believe he'd been ill even before the event that had caused his amnesia.

The grounds of Vince Malum Residential Living Center surrounded me on all sides. From my vantage point on the roof, it seemed so sane—the lush grass, the old oaks, and the paths with their strategically placed benches. In the distance, the employee parking lot was a patchwork of columns and rows, cars tidily arranged.

Inside the building, patients were tidily arranged as well, in rooms designed to suit their needs. Nurses and doctors went about their duties, distributing meds and accompanying patients to their sessions. *Tick. Tock.* By the clock, security guards patrolled the building on choreographed paths, their steps metered, their dialogue repetitive. This patina of order hid an inner world of chaos where no one and no thing was either predictable or reliable.

I turned away from the edge.

Doc Bella stood a few feet away. She'd been watching me. The wind disturbed her white coat, patterned skirt, and the short auburn curls heavily salted with gray. The staff called her Grandma Bella behind her back. She was in her seventies and still as sharp as a syringe.

"For a minute there," Bella said, "I thought *you* might jump."

I met her steady gaze. "And you weren't going to stop me?"

Bella smiled a psychiatrist's smile, non-committal. "Of course, you know that if you ever want to talk, I'm available for you."

My shoes crunched in the rooftop gravel as I crossed the distance between us.

"Thanks, Doc, but I'm fine. I just wanted to see—"

"—what might have been?" she finished for me.

"—how dangerous it really is up here."

"Colin has informed me, in no uncertain terms, that he's going to marry you."

I cringed inside. "Look—"

Bella interrupted me. "I'm not here to judge you. That's not my job. However. I feel it *is* my responsibility to give you fair warning." Her gaze was no-nonsense, as firm as that of a mother superior. "You're getting involved with a man who has no memory of his past. He could be anyone. I'm telling you this so you'll guard your heart. Save a bit back for your own good. When he remembers, you may not care for that person very much."

I nodded and said, "Okay," though she may as well have been asking a rose to bloom only halfway.

Bella clasped her hands on her stomach and looked out at the scenery. "In order for him to be with you—once his memories return—he'll have to sacrifice that other life."

I had thought about that. Many times. What if his previous life had been beautiful? What if he had children? A wife who loved him? If so, I was the other woman and—even I had to admit—probably not worth the sacrifice.

I asked, "How is he?"

"That's what I came to tell you." Bella hooked her arm through mine and guided me toward the roof exit. "We've got him settled in bed. He says he *wasn't* trying to kill himself."

"What was he doing?"

"Trying to fly."

"Oh. Gee. That's a relief."

Bella chuckled. "A mixed blessing, yes."

When we reached the heavy security door, I tugged it open and held it for her. An emergency exit sign illuminated the concrete stairwell.

"Did you sedate him?"

"No."

"Restrain him?"

"For now."

As I started to follow Bella across the threshold, something made me look back over my shoulder and scan the roof, searching. We were on the roof of a four-story building, but it felt like we were being watched. It was the first of many such feelings, and it made my skin crawl. I rubbed the back of my neck and hurried to stay on Bella's heels.

When the door shut behind me, it cut off all daylight. Shadows swelled up from the floor and dropped down from the ceiling. One hand clutching the metal railing, I put the other in my pocket

and found my straight pin. I placed the pad of my index finger against the point and pressed. The pin slid easily in. Pain helped me keep the panic at bay.

My footsteps echoed in counterpoint to Bella's. It took me a full flight of stairs to get up the nerve to ask my next question, afraid of the answer. "Do we have to cancel our plans?" For months, I'd been looking forward to a weekend in the countryside with Colin. I'd arranged a pass for him, contingent upon his good behavior.

"That won't be necessary," replied Bella. "We could all use some time away. Myself included. Unless something else happens between now and then, your trip is still approved."

"Even after..."

"You're his grounding wire, Viviane. What he did today was troublesome, but I think time alone with you will do him good. I trust you to watch out for him."

I released the breath I'd been holding.

"However," Bella said, "I want you to talk to him. Convince him he can't leap off buildings."

I admitted, "Sometimes it's hard to keep his feet on the ground."

"Truer words were never spoken, my dear."



I made my way through the Center to the Men's Wing and paused just outside Colin's room. My back against the wall there, I closed my eyes to focus on the breath going in and out of my body, deepening my inhalations and lengthening my exhalations. Gradually, the worried voices in my head quieted, and my body relaxed.

After I knocked, an orderly opened Colin's door. "Hey-dee ho, Viv."

"Hi there, Jimmy."

Jimmy had been a cannibal in a past life. He'd confided this strange secret to me on another evening when we were standing guard together over Colin. It had started with an innocent question for the sake of conversation.

"Jimmy, what made you decide to go into healthcare?"

The large man considered the question and his response, and finally, he said, "I was a cannibal in a past life. I have to make up for it in this one, by helping more people than I ate."

"I see."

"It's karmic balance, y'know? I was bad. Now, I try to be extra good so I can get a better life next time, maybe wealth or good looks. Y'know?"

I wanted to laugh, but he wasn't joking. "What makes you think you were a cannibal?"

Jimmy leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "I know because I remember it sometimes, at night, right before I fall asleep. I have flashes where I'm eating someone. It's a nightmare, except I'm awake." He paused, then whispered, "Sometimes, I can even taste it."

That was the thing about being public with your mental illness. People told you things they

would never mention in polite society, assuming you wouldn't be freaked out by it.

After a brief, uncomfortable silence, Jimmy added, "You probably think that's crazy."

I shrugged. "Because you believe you were a cannibal in a past life? I've heard crazier. Truth is, I've never met anyone who was completely sane. Have you?"

He clapped me on the shoulder and gave a hardy, "No, ma'am, I sure have not."

Ever since that conversation, Jimmy had given me special consideration, as if we'd bonded over his secret.

I entered Colin's room. "You can take a break if you want, Jimmy. I'll stay with him for a while."

Jimmy made to leave. "I could use a piss and some coffee. After that, I'll wait outside for you. Just yell if you need me."

"Thanks."

I waited for the door to shut behind him, then pulled a chair across the room. I placed it near the head of the bed and perched on the edge of it. "Hey, cutie. You awake?"

Colin lay on his back with his wrists buckled to the rails. A thick strap crossed his chest. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him restrained, but it never stopped bothering me. I undid the chest strap.

Colin resembled a child. His light reddish-brown hair had a wild, cow-licked quality, his tight curls a chaotic dance, and his face had the long-lashed, boyish features that would keep him handsome throughout his life, but there was more. He had innocence about him, as if he were seeing everything for the first time. That hadn't diminished over the years, though his delusions and hallucinations added a sense of whimsy.

Without opening his eyes or otherwise moving, Colin said, "I have to talk to you." His voice dropped so low that I had to lean forward to hear. "I saw her."

I unbuckled the nearest arm strap. "You saw who?"

"The hag. And I remember what she is."

"I don't understand."

"She's a scout—a tracking dog." Paranoia came with the territory of Colin's mental illness, but it unnerved me when he talked like that.

"Honey, why were you on the roof?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." He opened his eyes and looked at me. "She's looking for me. That's why I went to the roof. She nests there."

"Promise me you'll stay off the roof, okay? It's dangerous."

"Not for me," he said, so calmly, as if he were saying he had made a delicious ham and cheese omelet.

I almost believed him, but then he broke the spell.

"I can fly."

His confession triggered an explosion in my emotions—a dirty bomb at my core. It infected all of me.

"Don't say that!"

"It's true."

Through gritted teeth, I seethed at him. "It isn't true." I put my face in my hands and the image of him lying dead on the patio appeared in my brain. "Look. You can't fly. Okay? No one can fly. I need you to get better, Colin. I need you to be okay. Flying is not okay. Do you understand that?"

"But..."

"No buts!"

Lucany ebbed and flowed. That was how it worked—the human condition. I'd never met anyone immune to those currents. Some people just worked harder than others to hide it, especially from themselves. So-called "stable" people pushed their emotions down deep. They had their methods—just as I did—for maintaining a façade of normalcy, but even the ones most in denial couldn't fully insulate themselves from the suspicion that they didn't quite fit the so-called norm.

Then there were those who gave up the fight for sanity. Keeping the tide at bay could be exhausting. When you had no strength left, it was far too easy to go with the flow. I knew this from experience. I called it "stalking the moon."

I found my pin and pricked my finger, then my thumb. I breathed. Finally, I said, "Honey, no matter what, you don't *have* to fly away."

"I might have to, to keep you safe."

"I can take care of myself."

"There's a chance that might be true."

I sighed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

CHAPTER 3

By the time I left Colin's room, it was 8:45 p.m., and I was fifteen minutes late.

I threaded my way through the Center's halls to the Women's Wing. The atmosphere there differed from the men's. Security was tighter on the testosterone side. Men had a predictable tendency to express themselves through violence toward others. Women relied more on screaming, tears, and self-mutilation.

The nurses' station was a bubble of reinforced glass at the edge of an open recreation area. I waved to the worn-out, middle-aged nurse stationed there and received the same in return. Linda had been a fixture at the Center longer than I had. In her mid-fifties, she had no children, no husband, and only photos of her cats on her desk. Linda pushed a button and spoke into a microphone. Her voice came, tinny, out of speakers tucked high in the room's corners. "Good evening, Viviane."

I waved again but didn't pause. The recreation room was empty that late in the evening—lock-down was at 9:00. Lights-out came at 9:30. *Tick tock.*

The rec room had olive-colored, vinyl couches and armchairs facing a flat-screen television anchored high on the wall. Several round tables provided places to play games or draw pictures. One held a 1000-piece puzzle in progress. A picture of kittens in a flower garden graced the box. Years flowed onward, but nothing about the Center ever changed.

I headed down the hallway past a series of bedrooms. I used to glance right and left as I walked down the hall, peeking through open doors. Over the years, I'd seen enough private moments of despair, degradation, and self-indulgence, had met enough eyes staring back at me that I no longer looked. None of what I saw in those rooms surprised me anymore. After fifteen years of visiting and working at the Center, I'd seen almost everything—almost.

Voices called to me from the rooms or talked about me as I passed.

"Hey, Viviane."

"Hi, Viv."

"It's Gisèle's daughter."

"She's here again."

"Viviane's here."

I knew every patient on that floor by name and temperament. They suffered from a range of maladies—severe depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD, schizophrenia, phobias, and any number of other mental and mood conditions—so extreme they had either given up on blending into society or their loved ones had given up on them.

Vince Malum Residential Living Center rarely took the one-night or even the one-week stands. It housed patients for months, years, or even the rest of their lives. Sometimes, someone got well enough to reintegrate into the world, but it was rare. Most patients only left when they transferred to a different facility or went to live at home with relatives. Or they died.

My mom, Gisèle, stood behind the chair at the dressing table, brush in hand. She was ghostly in her white nightgown with billowy sleeves and eyelet lace, her face an expressionless blank, eyes gone distant. She was still beautiful, though her body had begun to soften and wrinkles had invaded the landscape around her eyes and mouth. She was the kind of woman who would always be lovely, classy, and graceful—no matter what.

She was brushing the hair of an imaginary child, a child who had long since grown up.

I took my seat in front of her, facing the dressing table, and watched her in the mirror. Her eyes were midnight blue, while mine were more like scratchy blue-gray wool. She had thick golden hair streaked with silver. I'd never grown out of my baby hair. Mine was thinner, curlier, had less gold and more mouse.

"Sorry I'm late, Mom." I felt safe there, in her sanctum—safer than anywhere else—and it was pleasant to be with her.

She pressed her belly against my shoulder—the most pleasant physical contact she and I ever shared—and brushed my hair as if it had been there all along, not missing a stroke.

Throughout most of my childhood, I'd believed my mom was dead. It wasn't until I turned eighteen, when a letter came from a law firm, that I realized the truth. In the time it took me to read the letter, my world had exploded. I learned that my mom wasn't dead and that my grandfather had been lying to me all those years. The news had hit me hard. I threw away all the acceptance letters I'd received from colleges and took a job at the Center in order to be near her, get to know her, and take care of her. Fifteen years later, I was still working at the Center and still visiting my mom five out of seven nights.

My mom spoke suddenly. "Kypris was young then—young and beautiful." My mother was a storyteller. Her stories were part and parcel of her delusion. Sometimes, they spilled from her verbally. Sometimes, she wrote them in her journals. The stories always involved a witch named Kypris and an elven prince named Chance.

Mom said, "Kypris had already been out of her head for a long time, but she'd only just understood what it meant. She took far too many risks, because she believed she had nothing to lose. And yet, it was her husband, Chance, who saved her life." She kept brushing, pulling the hair back from my temples and forehead, pausing only to work carefully through any knots she found. Her gaze remained fixed on a point perpendicular to my own reality.

"Winter will be here soon." Mom leaned over and set the brush on the mirrored dressing table.

"It's almost spring, Mom." I stood and went to the bed.

"When the cold comes, it gets in your bones and your brain. It eats you from the inside out."

"You'll be warm in your room."

Mom came to stand beside me. "When you go, take me with you in your heart."

"You're always in my heart." We had this kind of strange conversation from time to time.

Though Richard, our shared psychiatrist, assured me that Mom was talking to an imaginary friend, I

pretended we were actually connecting, and sometimes it seemed we were.

I pulled back the covers on the bed, and Mom crawled in and settled on her side. I leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, then drew the blankets up. "Good night. Sleep well."

Mom said, "And when you awake, I'll be near." She closed her eyes.

"I love you." I folded over the top edge of the blanket and smoothed it, then reached to switch off the bedside lamp.

Mom's hand wrapped around my wrist, tightly enough to startle me, and when she spoke, her voice hissed. Through clenched teeth, she said, "Watch out for the hag. Do not drop your guard." Her eyes—now open and trained on me—reflected the glow of the night-light.

"You're hurting me." I pried at her fingers.

Her hand dropped to the bed. Relaxing back onto the pillow, she closed her eyes again.

I stood there, rubbing my arm until Nurse Linda stuck her head in to remind me it was time for lights-out.

"You okay?" Linda asked when she saw my face.

"Yeah," I replied. "It's just been a long day." And it was about to get longer. I headed for the Center's laundry facilities, where I worked the graveyard shift.

As I rounded the corner to the employee locker room, I heard a familiar voice say, "Thirteen."

Ajani Jones was seated on the bench, bent in half to untie his shoes. With his head down, the stealthy patch of smooth, dark skin peeked through at his crown.

"Thirteen years I been workin' this God-forsaken job."

I grabbed a clean uniform off the shelf. We washed, sterilized, and bagged them along with everything else. "You sure it's only been thirteen *years*?" I asked. "Feels closer to thirteen *lifetimes*."

"Amen to that, sister," Ajani replied. He was speaking to the other woman in the room, a stranger to me. She had obviously worked the shift before ours. Ajani said, "I'd have quit long ago if I didn't have six kids eatin' me out of house and home."

"*Diós mio!*" The woman gave Ajani an exaggerated look of surprise.

"I don't think God had a hand in it," I said. "It was definitely the Devil made him do it." My fingers knew the movements to open my locker's padlock, having performed them a million times.

Julio came into the locker room, his pace steady, and went straight to his locker. He was compact, only a little taller than me, with short dark hair, impressive eyebrows, and a smile that could light up a room—when he chose to share it.

Ajani told us, "This is Lucinda." He stood and removed his dress shirt, revealing a white tank top, muscled chest, and thick upper arms.

I offered Lucinda my hand. "Nice to meet you."

She accepted the handshake. "Thanks, Miss Rose."

"Call me Viviane. We don't do formality on the graveyard shift."

Ajani said, "Miss Viviane is the only white woman at the laundry, but don't let that fool you."

She's the best damned floor supervisor we got."

I wagged a warning finger at him. "You better watch that racist shit. Around here, we're all just stains."

"True dat." Ajani laughed and nodded wisely. He took off his jeans and stood there in his boxers, turning his back to us.

"That's Julio," I told Lucinda. They gave each other a little wave.

I changed out of my street clothes. It was far too hot in the laundry to wear more than running shorts and a tank top under our uniforms, and some people wore less. I felt vulnerable without the added cloth between me and the laundry scrubs. It wasn't a question of modesty. Modesty wasn't necessary in the laundry—we all sweated together. No, it was about having an extra layer of protection against the three Ps, even if it was just psychological armor.

Scarlett "Lettie" Sorvino rushed into the break room, boobs bouncing and girly heels clattering on the concrete. She skidded to a halt in front of a locker, grabbed the waistband of her skirt, and shoved it down to her ankles revealing spandex bike shorts snugged tight to a curvaceous behind.

I said, "Cutting it close, aren't you, Lettie?"

"Sorry—had to break up with Nina tonight." She glanced at the clock as she kicked off the skirt and her shoes. Lettie had the kind of looks that could go in any direction, from slutty to Catholic schoolgirl, from dangerous to dazzling, and back again. She was a chameleon, but she called herself a mutt, and her African-Italian mix of genes showed in the color of her skin and hair, the prominence of her nose. I had always thought she was at her most beautiful without make-up, though she used quite a lot most of the time—even at the laundry.

"You broke up with Nina?"

"It was overdue. I'm fine."

I dropped it. "Ajani, you're on washers. Lettie, you're sorting. Julio's on dryers."

Lettie slid her jaw to one side and rolled her eyes. "I s'pose it's my turn." Nobody wanted to sort. That was where you ran into the three Ps.

Jaxon said, "Guess that leaves me ironing and folding?" Neither tall nor short, his body had a powerful, substantial mass. His trimmed beard and mustache joined sideburns and melded into a cap of hair, all the color of Turkish coffee.

"Yeah, Jax. You're the caboose tonight." I clapped my hands. "Time to go, people. This train is leavin' the station." *Tick. Tock.* The team spread out across the laundry facility, and we took over for the previous shift.

"Have a good shift," Lucinda called as we filed out.



I still had three hours to go before we were done for the night and, I was steamy with sweat.

After fifteen years on the job, I was used to it, but that didn't make it any less unpleasant. When you worked in the Center's laundry, you wore *sangfroid* as a shield. You had to, or you'd never make it. The laundry was no picnic. Far too often, you'd pull a sheet out of a bag and find one of the three Ps: piss, poop, or puke. It took time to get used to that. Whenever it happened to new employees, some gagged, some recoiled, and some quit—some on the first day, some a week or two into it. Those of us who stuck it out—who survived the heat, humidity, noise, mind-bending boredom, and constant contact with bio hazmat—were badass and proud of it.

Everything about the laundry dampened your senses, from the earplugs to the latex gloves. The washers went through their cycles, firing up, spinning down, and rattling away. The gargantuan laundry machines—three washers and three dryers—created a constant cacophony. Twenty-four hours a day—*boom, boom, boom*—the machines roared. Shifts came and went. *Tick. Tock.* The faces changed, but the machines never stopped because the three Ps never stopped.

Someone with a morbid sense of poetry once scratched a saying into the paint on one of the dryers. It became the laundry's motto: "Today, you're pain. Tomorrow, a stain."

I could tell by the tone of a washer's hum that it needed repairing, and I could hear a solid object knocking about before anyone else. It was a gift. The laundry facility was the one place where I was in control—of my world and of my mind. I'd worked my way up through the ranks to manager, and I ran a tight team.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket.

U coming 2 see me? A text message from my fiancé Colin.

I typed: *Maybe.*

Tease.

I went back to inventorying supplies with a lighter step. As I counted, Jaxon Bellonescu peeled away from the ironing machine and crossed toward me. Even in a baby-blue laundry smock and pants, he could have been a desert nomad, skin tanned by a harsh sun, mouth hardened by a harsh life. "That load's done," he said. "You want me to start the next one?" His Turkish accent rolled the words roundly in his mouth.

"Yeah." I checked off another load on the big board. That made ten for the night. Right on schedule for another Productivity Award.

A scream sounded above the din.

All heads turned to Lettie as she stumbled back from the table where she'd been prepping dirty laundry for the washers.

"Kill it!" she cried. "Kill it!"

Everyone in the room dropped what they were doing and headed toward her, including me. She started cursing a blue streak, and as I got closer, I saw why. A snake lay on top of the pile of sheets, aprons, and towels. Not a big one, but a snake nevertheless.

"Somebody kill it!" Lettie shouted again, cringing away so she didn't have to look at it, then

peeking, afraid to turn her back on it.

Julio M.F. Quinones worked the dryers. M.F. stood for Marcos Fernandez, despite what he told everyone. He walked right up to the snake and dropped a plastic storage bowl over it, relaxed as you please. A wave of relief rippled around the room.

"It's only a garden snake. You don't kill them," Julio said. "They work hard for you. Hand me that clipboard over there."

I stepped up, nabbing the empty clipboard and handing it to him.

Julio slid the board under the bowl with surprising gentleness. He picked the whole package up and carried it to the exit, where he paused. "Señorita Rose," Julio shouted, "Can I grab a smoke while I'm out there?"

The clock told me he was once again ignoring the 15-30-15 break schedule, but I nodded my approval anyway. How could I not, after that heroic display.

Earlier that night, Julio'd had us in stitches, telling us how his *gringa* girlfriend had dumped him to join a community of vegan hippies. He said it was his own fault. He should have stuck with Latinas as his mother had advised. "Latinas don't go vegan," he'd said, "and they don't leave a boyfriend—especially an employed one—to join a tits-free commune." Then, he'd spat into one of the garbage cans and walked away. That was how he was.

Maybe I sensed that his humor hid very real pain at the break-up. Maybe the thought of a bummed smoke called to me. Whatever the reason, I gave him a few minutes to release the snake outside, then followed after him.

As soon as the laundry's fire door closed behind me, the noise level dropped significantly, and I pulled the earplugs from my ears. I walked down the concrete-block corridor. No windows. No nothing. Cool air dried my sweat and left a pleasant chill on my skin. My footsteps echoed in the emptiness. I hit the door to the back stairwell with one smooth, practiced move. The stairwell was the best place to smoke. No one ever came down that way, so the likelihood of getting caught was slim.

"Hey, Julio," I said. "It's me. Gimme a..."

I froze in place.

Julio was sliding slowly down the wall. His arms twitched, hands like spiders riding their webs. Rolling upward, the whites of his eyeballs glowed in the fluorescent lighting, and his pupils eclipsed his brown irises. His mouth gaped, revealing a convulsing tongue and the entrance to his cavernous throat.

The door slammed shut behind me, breaking me out of my stunned inaction. I ran to him.

"Julio!" I cried, shaking his shoulder. He didn't respond—just crumpled to the floor and slumped to one side. "Julio!" I pulled out my cell phone and dialed the Center's security desk. Nothing. No bars. I stumbled up the stairs until I got a signal, then dialed again.

Esteban, the night watchman, answered.

"I need a doctor or an ambulance. Julio's having some kind of seizure, in the back stairwell, basement level. This is Viviane Rose. Please, hurry."

"I'll get—" Our connection broke as I raced back down the stairs.

Julio wasn't breathing. He had no pulse. What was next? Why hadn't I taken that CPR refresher last year? Whatever memories I had of the required training from years ago jumbled in my head.

I grabbed him by the shoulders of his smock, pulled him down the stairs toward the concrete landing. He was heavy, and as soon as gravity overtook him, it nearly dragged me down with him.

My version of cardiopulmonary resuscitation was inelegant at best, but I was determined to keep Julio alive. The air was going in and coming back out, but his heart had stopped. As the minutes passed and my back began to ache, I grew less confident that I'd have the strength to see it through.

Finally, Nurse Andrea, the overnight nurse from the women's wing, arrived.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," I told her between chest pumps. "There was...a snake. He was...taking it out. Went on break...and I was...looking for him...when I found him...he was having...some kind of fit...maybe the snake bit him...don't know."

Andrea checked his pulse. "I'll take over the heart massage. You breathe for him. I'll tell you when."

"Okay." Tears crawled up into my nose and sinuses. I sniffled. I couldn't afford to lose my shit. I *had* to keep it together. I felt for the straight pin I kept in my pocket. It was my anchor, my lifeline to sanity. I pushed it through my clothes and into my thigh. The pain brought everything back into focus, cleared my vision, and quieted my mind. In the space of a second, I was fine again. I positioned Julio's head, opened his mouth, and pinched off his nose.

Andrea counted. "Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty. Now. Breathe." She paused long enough to watch me give Julio the kiss of life. We repeated it more times than I could count.

When the paramedics finally arrived, led by the night watchman, they brought equipment, a defibrillator. It took two shocks, but Julio came back. He sucked in air as if he had a black hole inside him. Andrea and I both gasped with him.

Julio began to talk, rambling in Spanish. "Ella se enoja. Coatlicue se enoja. Se enoja."

She's angry. Coatlicue is angry. She's angry.

The paramedics lifted him onto a stretcher. As they strapped him down, he hissed my name, "Señorita Rose. Ella se enoja," he croaked. He rolled frightened-animal eyes toward me.

"It's okay, Julio," I told him. "Nobody's angry. It's okay."

Around seven a.m., as I filed the paperwork requesting a temporary replacement for Julio, I thought about calling Richard, but eventually decided against it. I didn't need my psychiatrist as much as I needed a good stiff drink

What I got was bacon and eggs. Abram had breakfast waiting for me when I walked in the door—as he usually did.

CHAPTER 4

The next evening, I crossed the barrier into the Men's Wing and knocked on Colin's door. They had taken him off suicide watch, and I could visit him as I usually did.

"Come in."

I entered, shut the door behind me, and would have locked it, if it had a lock. We met in the middle of the room and went straight into an embrace, our bodies crushed together, hungry mouths seeking each other. He was taller than me, strong and masculine. The bit of reddish stubble on his cheeks scratched my face.

I thrust my fingers through his auburn curls, melding my palms to his head, and held his mouth against mine. It had been days that had felt like weeks, months even, since the last time I'd felt his arms around me.

He backed me against his desk, hands pulling my skirt up, tugging my panties down, and all the while, our tongues danced. The edge of the desk was hard against my ass, but I didn't mind. It added to the urgency of our lovemaking.

We were both ready when he slid into me, erect and wet, and I bit his shoulder to keep from crying out. I locked my ankles behind his back, being careful—mostly—not to dig the heels of my boots into him.

He rocked me hard. I came. He came, and he held me so tightly that we were one body. I clung to him, hid my face in the crook of his neck, and breathed in his smell, trembling.

"One day," he whispered, "you'll be my queen."

"One day," I said, "we're going to get caught, and I'll lose my job." I licked up his neck to his mouth, and we kissed until he withdrew from me and pulled me to the bed where we rested together, letting our heartbeats slow. I was back in high school, hiding my boyfriend from Abram, making out in risky places.

"I want to find your lost memories," I said. "Hypnotize you the way Richard does me."

Colin sighed heavily. "We've talked about this, Viv. It sounds dangerous." He lay on his back, and I curled in against him, one hand on his bare chest.

"It's not, and if it can break through your amnesia—"

"If it could break through my amnesia, then Doc Bella would've tried it already."

I grunted in frustration and raised up on one elbow to glare down at him. "Sometimes I think you don't want a normal life."

"Viv...c'mon."

"Seriously. I think you're afraid to get well. Honey, the sooner you remember, the sooner we can get on with our life together."

"Maybe I don't want to know."

"Not knowing is...more dangerous than knowing."

After a pause, he said, "Let's give it a try, but if it doesn't work, you let it go. For good."

I nodded enthusiastically and sat up. "Promise."

Tick. Tock.

He trusted me. I was the pillar against which he leaned, the crutch that held him upright. I had a touch of worry that I might not be able to handle what came up out of his subconscious, but I pushed it aside. We had to do something. I was impatient for Colin to be whole, to know what demons from his past we would have to overcome. Together, I told myself, we could handle anything.

I counted him down. For the first time, I understood how Richard must have felt whenever he and I were in session. With my role reversed, I had immense power, and it filled me with a calm elation—and hope.

When I was sure he was under, I said, "You're standing in front of a mirror. The mirror is foggy, so you can't see yourself. If you want, you can pick up a towel and wipe away the fog."

"I see the mirror. The towel is around my waist. If I take it off, I'll be naked."

"It's okay to be naked here," I said. "Nobody can see you but you."

"Okay. I'm wiping off the fog. I see myself."

"Describe what you know about yourself."

"I'm very far from home."

"Where's home?"

"Gehenna."

"Do you know your name?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You may hate me when you find out."

"I could never hate you."

Much to my surprise, tears flowed out of the corners of his eyes. His hands remained at his sides, still and relaxed. "I can never go back," he said. "They'll kill me." His face grew sharp, features taking on a more angular edge. That frightened me more than the tears. "I remember."

He remembered. Excitement and fear coursed through me simultaneously. I tugged at a hangnail with my teeth. The flap of skin pulled away with a sharp pain followed by a welling of blood. I sucked on it.

When I woke him, Colin's face relaxed, and the frightening mask fell away. He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling as if processing, then he turned his eyes to meet mine.

"What do you remember?" I asked him with more than a little trepidation.

He smiled. "Nothing significant."

"You said you were from a place called Gehenna. You said, 'I can never go back. They'll kill me.'"

"I did?"

"We can go again. Close your eyes."

"No." Colin took one of my hands. "I have the naughtiest urge to make love to you all night long," he said. "Did you put some sort of post-hypnotic suggestion in me?"

I laughed, and it broke the tension. I let it go—for the moment.

We went to dinner in the men's cafeteria, taking a corner table with our mashed potatoes, breaded pork tenderloins, chocolate pudding, and milk. The room buzzed with quiet conversations, the vibe different somehow, as if the patients were afraid to talk above a whisper.

"What's going on?"

Colin surveyed the room, then went back to his meal. "One of the guys died last night."

"Oh no. Which one? Did I know him?"

"Danny MacIntyr." The name rang a small bell, and I envisioned his face—quirky and mischievous.

"He was so young," I said.

"Twenty-two."

I put the fork down without taking the bite and rested my hand on his arm. "Were you guys close?"

"He was my friend."

"Why didn't you say something before?"

Colin put his hand on my cheek and looked me in the eyes. "And what? Spoil our time together? No way." He kissed me on the forehead. "People die. Life goes on. I'll miss him, but not enough to stop grabbing every second with you. Or grabbing you every second I can. Or grabbing you for seconds, if I can."

I laughed. "Stop, stop. You had me at 'grab.'"

"Seriously, though. You never know how much time we have left."

Tears of love filled my eyes. "You're right."

"You have to be careful, okay? Promise me." Colin's tone went from casual serious to dead serious.

"I'm always careful."

"No. You have to be extra careful. She's watching us."

A cathedral of alarm bells sounded in my head. "Who's watching us?"

Colin lowered his voice. "The hag. The one who killed Danny."

I had a sudden memory of Julio's wild eyes, spitting out the words, "She's angry!" It shook me, so I resorted to platitudes and diversion. "It's okay. Finish your dinner. We're safe."

He rubbed my cheek with his thumb, then returned his attention to his food.



"Girl, you need some down time," Lettie said in the laundry break room the next morning, at the end of another exhausting shift. "I'm just sayin'." She had a motherly streak as wide as the Illinois River, though her methods of mothering weren't always by the book. "Why don't you and I go out tonight? Have a few drinks, dance, and watch the pretty people. It'll do you good, blow the stink off you."

"I dunno."

"I'm not taking no for an answer. You need a reminder that there's a real world out there, with real people. You been cooped up in this nut tin for too fuckin' long." She had a point, and something about the idea actually did appeal to me. I wasn't much of a partier—never had been—but it was nice sometimes to pretend I was normal.

There was one problem, though. "I don't have anything to wear."

"You don't know by now that I got you covered? Come by my place. We'll eat and play dress-up."

"Indian take-out?"

"*Chana masala*, yes, please."

Five hours later, we were at the Midnight Saloon in Peoria, drinking lemon drops. I wore my own tight boot-cut jeans and a tank top embroidered with red roses that Lettie had loaned me. I wished Colin could see me. I looked better than was good for me.

Lettie thought so too. She was plucking at my curls with one hand. "You're hot. I'm telling you. The boys—and girls—are gonna be all over you any minute now."

I said, "God, I hope not," but I was laughing.

"You should wear make-up more often. I didn't realize you had eyelashes."

"Smart ass."

A laser beam disappeared into Lettie's black hair. She asked, "Wanna dance?"

I enjoyed the sassy beat of the music, but I had no idea what to do with it. The country line dancers had taken over the floor and were kicking out. Although I periodically jerked around my own living room like a Devo puppet, I never felt comfortable dancing in front of others.

"I haven't had enough to drink," I answered.

"Mind if I go? This song is the best."

I didn't mind. Lettie slithered through the crowd, all hip-swingy and sexy, into a spot next to a group of cowgirls. Her skin soaked up the light, its natural tan pulling in all the color and flash. Her short dress and red cowboy boots reminded me of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. She'd put sparkles in her hair, and they glimmered from across the room.

A man sat down in Lettie's chair.

"Tell me," he said, raising his voice to be heard. "What's the first thing you notice about me?"

He watched the dancers, his face in profile to me. He had an enormous nose. And his hair looked like he ran his fingers through it, instead of using a comb. Other than that, there wasn't

much about him that was remarkable, except maybe his eyelashes. They swept out and up, long for a man.

He turned and caught me looking at him. I felt the blush rising even before it hit my cheeks, and I looked quickly away without answering his question.

"I know you," he said.

The music bounced so heavily on his words that I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. "Excuse me?"

He repeated, "I know you," and that time, there was no mistaking.

"Have we met?"

"No. But I know a lot of things about you—how you see things sometimes—things nobody else sees."

I scooted away, and he put his hand on my arm. He wore a large, gold ring with a symbol stamped into it—a coat of arms for a college or secret society. A roaming beam of light hit it and ricocheted into my eyes. For a moment, it blinded me, and I cringed.

He leaned in. "I know what it's like. Always wondering what's real and what's not. You're probably even wondering whether I'm real." He squeezed my arm. "I am."

If I had a nickel for every time a hallucination said that to me... I pulled away, but I didn't leave. "What do you want?"

"I want you to be careful. You're mixed up in something bigger than you can imagine."

"I have a very active imagination, but I think you've got the wrong person."

"You're Viviane Rose, and you live with your grandfather. You're engaged to marry Colin Aubrey, a patient at Malum Center. You work in the laundry room there."

"Now you're freaking me out." I edged away from him.

He shouted to be heard over the music and the distance growing between us. "I'm a psychologist. I can help you."

I got to my feet. He stood too and seemed ready to follow me. I escaped toward the dance floor. I could see Lettie there, through the bodies. They didn't part for me like they had for her, and I was a pinball, bouncing off the dancers. I sent my apologies on ahead.

"Sorry. Sorry. Excuse me. Sorry, excuse me."

The distance between Lettie and me got longer, not smaller. I couldn't seem to reach her, and the farther away she was, the more I wanted to be near her. That old, familiar paranoia made my head feel thick. Was everyone looking at me? Talking about the strange girl? Saying I didn't belong there. Laughing at me. Pointing.

Watch out, psycho bitch comin' through.

Then Lettie had her arms around me. "Hey. I thought you didn't want to dance?"

Her eyes welcomed me, and a feeling of safety enveloped me. The fog lifted, the voices in my head shut up, and I could breathe again. I searched the crowd as the paranoia receded. No one was

talking about me or to me. No one had even noticed me.

"I recognize that look," Lettie said. "Are you freaking out?"

"There was a creepy guy talking to me."

Lettie craned her neck to scan the area around our table, but he had disappeared. "What guy?"

"I don't know. Maybe I imagined him."

CHAPTER 5

The Friday before my mini-vacation with Colin wasn't as uneventful as I'd have wished. It began with my usual session with Richard. Smooth sailing—until the end.

He sat across from me in his office, one ankle over the opposite knee. Shadows sculpted him into a devil intent on mischief, eye sockets darkened and mouth hard between his black mustache and trim goatee. He would have been mortified if he'd known how the dim lighting warped his features. Everything else about him was calculated to convey a sense of professionalism, competence, and caring. He asked, "Are you still going out to the lake with Colin this weekend?"

"Doc Bella says it's okay. She thinks it might even do him some good."

"You've been taking your medication?"

"Every day."

"Any hallucinations?"

"None." It was a small enough lie, and one I was practiced at telling. I had learned early in life that it did me no good to be totally honest about what I saw, not even with Richard.

He leaned toward me abruptly, his gaze fixed on mine and said, with attention to each syllable, "You know, you don't have to stay with him out of a sense of guilt or responsibility."

I recoiled and put a hand up between us. "I'm not talking about that again."

Richard closed his leather-bound notebook using the fancy pen I'd given him for his fortieth birthday as a bookmark. He set them both aside and reached for the glass of vita-shake on the table beside him. "Then I suppose we're done for the day. I'll see you next week."



From there, my day got worse. Heading to work, I found the back stairwell empty, as always, a utilitarian tower lit with shabby fluorescent bulbs that flickered from time to time. I didn't dawdle. I rushed down the stairs so quickly, I almost didn't hear the noise.

I was thinking about the paperwork I'd have to do the following Monday. Payroll and inventory reports. I wasn't looking forward to it.

And then I heard a shuffling—a whisper. I froze, and my shadow froze too. Other shadows didn't. They continued to expand, stretching long down the wall.

"Hello? Is someone there?" I shook my head, squeezed my eyes shut, then reopened them. The shadows grew. They moved like a storm front across the wall. "Who's there? Look, I don't care who you are or what you're smoking, but you're scaring me, so just say something." I went for my straight pin and drove it into the pad of my middle finger. The pain was real, even if the rest wasn't.

Another hint of a sound that I wasn't entirely sure I'd heard came from above. I strained to listen, and when the first tendrils of fog came rolling down the stairs, my body took over where my mind left off. It pumped adrenalin into my blood. My heartbeat increased, and the approaching

choice—fight or flight—stirred in my limbs. My ears rang, the sound amplifying in gradual increments.

"Not real," I told myself.

Then, from behind me, someone grabbed my wrist.

I jumped and screamed.

Colin, in his pajamas, a step or two below me, as edgy as a cat on the verge of a fight, said, "You're not supposed to be here." He looked crazed. His curly hair stood out in all directions, blue eyes large and over-bright.

"Neither are you," I said. "How did you get through the security doors?"

He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me after him. "C'mon!" I had no choice but to follow down the stairs, focusing on my feet so as not to stumble or miss a step.

He said, "Maybe the hag knows you're my weakness."

"Colin." I tried to sound calm, although I didn't succeed. More loudly, I said, "Stop!"

But he didn't stop. He kept racing downward, his bare feet slapping on the concrete. Talking to me or himself, he said, "Maybe she's just a spiteful cunt."

At the bottom landing, Colin input the security code on the keypad. He shoved me through the doorway ahead of him and looked back over his shoulder.

"How did you get that code?" I asked.

"Stay back, bitch," he growled. "I won't let you touch her." He pulled the door shut behind us. He grabbed my wrist again and tugged me down the deserted corridor. The giant laundry machines thrummed in the distance.

"You're hurting me!"

He stopped and swung me around him until I slammed against the wall. My head reverberated against the concrete blocks. He turned me to face him, pressed his body against mine, and closed his hand over my mouth. I bit the inside of my cheek and tasted blood.

"Shhh," he hissed. "Shhhh. If she hears us, she'll kill you." His eyes were frenzied—terrified, he looked everywhere but at me. The aroma of his sweat was pungent in my nostrils. Colin watched over his shoulder toward the door. His hand slid upward, closing off my nostrils as well as my mouth.

I couldn't breathe. I pulled on his arm, but the harder I fought him, the more firmly he pressed himself against me, all the while, saying, "Shhhh. Hush. Shhhhh. Stop."

I kned him in the groin.

It took a second, but then Colin released me and fell to the floor with a loud groan.

I dropped my hands to my knees, breathing in gasps, trying not to puke or cry.

Ajani came out of the laundry room door. When he saw us, he sprinted the length of the hall and knelt beside Colin, though his concerned face lifted to me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded.

"What happened? Did he hurt you?"

I shook my head.

Colin sat up and told Ajani, "It was *her*. She came after us."

Ajani said, "It was her? Are you sure?"

Colin cocked his head to one side, listening. "She's gone now."

I sat back on my heels. "Please...don't encourage him."



Ajani took Colin back to his room, and I continued on to the laundry. Shaken, I had a hard time focusing. I regretted letting Ajani leave with Colin. He might report the incident, and I didn't want Bella to cancel our weekend. After all, no one would have believed he'd been trying to protect me from my own hallucination.

I took Ajani's station until he returned, pulling hot loads of laundry out of dryers and putting in wet loads. It didn't take him long to get back, and he came straight over to where I was. We put our heads close together so we wouldn't have to yell over the machines, tall Ajani bending down to me.

I asked, "Did you have any trouble?"

Ajani shook his head, though his expression still held concern.

I needed to know. "Did you tell anyone?"

"No." He looked me over with his black-gold eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

My lip was swollen, but not in any visible way, thank goodness. The bump on my forehead—there wasn't any blood or broken skin—was already bruising, but I'd survive. "Positive. Is he?"

"He'll be fine. What happened?"

I waved the question off. "It was my fault. I imagined a noise in the stairwell, and it freaked me out a little. I mentioned it to Colin, and it got him worked up too. We both overreacted. That's all."

Ajani's eyes narrowed more instead of less.

I added, "We've been under a lot of stress lately." I wasn't lying. Stress comes with the territory of mental illness. It's rough when you can never relax your guard. I put my hand on his arm.

"Thank you. I'd give you a raise, if I could."

Ajani laughed, and his whole body relaxed, tension draining from him as if someone had pulled a plug. He made a silly face to make me smile.

It worked.



The next day, I visited Colin in his room, and we wallowed together in tearful regret for hav-

ing hurt each other. I apologized. He apologized, and we agreed to never mention it to anyone, especially not Doc Bella. He made me promise to stay out of the back hallway. I humored him.

CHAPTER 6

The morning of our trip finally arrived. On my way to the Center, in my little yellow Fiesta, I sang with Heart's "Crazy on You." The sun radiated happiness, a new warmth that promised spring flowers and an eventual harvest. Tractors streamed along tracts of land, turning the soil. Signs of renewal lined either side of the road, across the Illinois plains, barns being painted and the first few calves of the season. Crows gathered, waiting for their chance to pluck the seeds that didn't get buried deeply enough.

I sang at the top of my lungs.

Colin and I had taken short vacations before. Six months earlier, he'd proposed to me during one of them.

When his more serious symptoms had presented, Doc Bella had resisted letting him leave the Center. I'd finally talked her into it. I'd reserved us a room at the Cozy Comfort Bed and Breakfast, right on the shore of Clinton Lake where Colin had proposed to me. I filled a basket with chocolate, fruit, cookies, and nuts, and I bought him a new shirt, new jeans, and a toiletry kit. Living with Abram, I didn't have many expenses, and it made me happy to spoil Colin.

I parked in a visitor's spot on the circle drive and walked around to the side of the building. Second-class citizens, patients, and employees didn't use the front entrance. I entered on the Women's Wing side—out of habit—and used the code to get through the locked door.

Jared Barker was on duty in the Receiving office. He looked up when I came in and gave his trademark nod, slow and low. "Morning."

"Hi, Jared. How's it going?"

"Quiet. Got no deliveries until later. I'm reading baseball blogs." He pointed at the computer screen. "No surfing porn at work. This is next best." Jared was younger than me, a brawny farm boy who'd been badly injured in a combine accident. He walked with a limp, and the arm they had reattached was forever bent, the muscles shortened and tight. His mind worked differently too, since the accident, all his etiquette barriers having fallen. "You're in early. You switch shifts?"

I leaned on the counter. "No. I'm not working this weekend. My fiancé and I are going out to Clinton Lake. We've got reservations at a little B-n-B, and we're going to relax for a couple days."

Jared's eyebrows went up. "Are you going to have sex?"

I winked. "God, I hope so."

He buzzed me through the interior door. "You get tired of him, I'm available. My dick works, even if the rest of me don't!"

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

The Men's Wing seemed deserted, but that was an illusion. The distant rumble from the dining room signaled breakfast, the busiest time of the day for the patients, orderlies, and nurses. Everyone was there—everyone but Colin. I found him seated on his bed, reading. He stood and I went to him

and slipped into his arms. "Good morning. Are you ready for an adventure?"

"I'm so ready." He kissed me on top of my head, and I rubbed my face against his chest.

"Perfect. Car's all packed, and I checked the list twice: lingerie, bubble bath, massage oil, a special playlist on my cellphone—R&B for those quiet moments. Did I mention I got a mani-pedi?"

He laughed. "You had me at lingerie."

I squeezed him. "Did you pack your toothbrush? That's the one thing I always forget."

"All packed. No halitosis monkeys allowed."

I didn't recognize his suitcase. "You got a new bag?"

"Doc Bella loaned it to me. I outgrew the other one. It's amazing how much stuff a person can accumulate."

Two years earlier, when Colin had first arrived at the Center, he'd only had the clothes on his back. He didn't even have a name, because he couldn't remember it. He chose "Colin Aubrey" for himself and said that having amnesia was like being born a second time, including the pain of the birth canal. Everything he'd known about himself had been gone, and he'd been left feeling broken and vulnerable.

A city hospital had transferred him to Malum Center because no one had shown up looking for him. The state paid for his care, feeding, and sessions with Doc Bella. The police had given up trying to find his identity, though Colin never had. He sat for hours browsing social media and scanning local news sites, studying faces, wondering if any of them—any single one of them—might know who he was and where he came from. He wanted to know his parents, whether he had brothers or sisters, and how they might have damaged him.

Doc Bella appeared in the doorway of Colin's bedroom. An invisible draft rippled her skirt. It followed her everywhere, but I was the only one who ever noticed it. It was just another of my many hallucinations—a trick played on me by mischievous electrical impulses in my head.

"Ready to go then?" As always, Bella's presence brought an instant seriousness to the occasion.

"We're ready." I stepped out of Colin's embrace. "I filed the paperwork. Contact information for the inn is there, and I documented our route, too."

"Good. Has Richard left yet?"

"He left this morning to go see family. He'll be back on Tuesday."

"You didn't forget your toothbrushes, did you?"

Colin and I both said, "No."

"Get on with it then. The sooner you leave, the sooner your trip begins."

Colin asked, teasing, "Anxious to be rid of us?"

"Maybe I need a rest, too." Bella winked at him.

Colin put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, Doc. Have a great time in Boston."

"I will, thanks. I'm looking forward to a change of pace."

Bella accompanied us to the car, her hand tucked in the crook of Colin's arm as we walked.

I asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"Three to six months. It depends on how long it takes to turn the patient around."

I said, "It's a compliment that they called you in to consult, isn't it?"

"The man's challenges fall within my area of expertise."

Colin said, "It's a job for Doc's famous chocolate chip cookies," and we all laughed.

When we got to the car, I caught an odd expression on Bella's face. Despite her encouragement, in that moment, when she didn't know I was looking, she frowned. I was eavesdropping on secret thoughts. While Colin loaded his suitcase in the trunk, I went to her and said quietly, "Don't worry. We'll be fine."

Her face transformed. She smiled at me—a confident smile, a psychiatrist's smile—and said, "Of course, you will. I'm just jealous. I can't remember the last time I had a romantic weekend."

"Maybe you'll meet someone in Boston."

"At my age? Nonsense."

We said our good-byes. Bella stood at the curb while we got into the car, waved as we pulled away, and didn't leave until after we'd turned the corner and gone out of sight.



We'd been driving down I-74 for about an hour when Colin said, "Pull over for a minute."

I looked at him to see if he was sick. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just pull over."

"Do you have to tinkle? I swear, you have the smallest bladder of anyone I know."

"I don't tinkle, woman. I'm a grown man. I take a piss, use the head, or drain the snake. I don't tinkle."

Once I'd pulled over and turned off the engine, he took my face in his hands. He kissed me with clarity, looking directly into my eyes. His mouth moved love across mine. Tender and sentimental, the kiss stoked my heart rather than my belly.

"No matter what happens," he said, "you will always be mine. Never forget that."

I said, "Never," and for the first time in a long time, I felt hopeful that we could live a normal, happy life together.

Colin's eyes crinkled at the corners. "So mote it be."

I touched my fingertips to those crinkles. "Who talks like that?"

He grabbed my hand and kissed it. "Let's go. I want to get there."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to stop."

"So I am."



Back on the road, we came to the lake and began to make our way around it. A long bridge crossed the water at one of its narrowest points. Traversing it was amazing, as if we were driving directly on the water. The lake's surface gleamed in the sunshine. With the windows down, the moist, fishy scent of it filled the car.

I spotted a crane and pointed it out to Colin.

He leaned forward to watch it take off and fly away.

On my left, an encroaching darkness cut back the sunshine. It started as a movement at the corner of my eye.

I swung my gaze toward it, made out a figure, a person, climbing onto the guardrail at the edge of the road.

It was a man, dressed all in black, and he was crouched, a spring ready to be sprung. Before I understood what he was doing, the man leapt onto the road, in front of the car, his arms and legs flailing. I had no time to do anything but react, and I jerked the wheel to one side.

My eyes captured him, his face, and its intense expression, then we hit the guardrail going forty miles an hour.

CHAPTER 7

The impact with the guard rail caused the airbags to explode in our faces.

Time turned surreal, *ticky-tocky*.

My mind scrambled to understand.

There are no accidents.

Tick.

Oh God.

Tock.

With a splash and a jolt, the car nose-dived into the water. I flew forward, arm slamming hard into the dashboard. White powder from the air bags made me cough.

I cried, "Colin!"

He was unconscious, blood on his forehead.

"Wake up!" I shook him, and pain shot up my arm.

Frigid water gushed in through the vents. It was happening so fast. I couldn't keep up.

I thought, *We're going to die*. I was staring into the lake's ominous murk, and my death stared back.

I fumbled with my seatbelt. When it released, it dropped me onto the steering wheel. I reach for Colin's seatbelt. When I released him, he fell forward, dead weight.

"Fuck!" I reached for him, but I couldn't orient my body to get leverage.

The surface of the lake came level with the open windows and poured into the car. It hit me in the face. I flailed.

Our descent accelerated.

Cold water swirled around me.

I took one last deep breath as the water level pushed my chin up, and then we were fully submerged. I half-crawled/half-swam out through the window. My lungs burned already.

Though the lake surrounded me, I was free. I saw sunlight shimmering on the surface above, beckoning me, but instead I swam across the roof toward Colin's window.

His arm floated out through the window. I latched onto it and pulled him toward me, me toward him.

He wasn't coming out of the car, and the car kept sinking.

I reached in to get a better grip.

My lungs spasmed, clenching with the need for breath.

And then a man floated in front of me, nose to nose with me. I couldn't make out his features. I absorbed his face as a single whole. He was a Rorschach blot that I would never forget as long as I lived.

He took my shoulders and turned me away from him, leaving me no time to resist. He

wrapped a strong arm across my chest and swam me upward.

I had no control, no air left in my lungs. My body did what it had been created to do—I inhaled. But, instead of air, the freezing water entered my lungs.

It was a losing battle. The more my body rejected the water, the more it let in.

As blackness closed in at the edges of my vision, I stopped blinking. The car was there, caught in my sight. I streamed backwards, away from it, dragged by the man swimming me to the surface. My hair flowed around my face, wretched seaweed reaching for the car, for Colin. Then nothing.



The awakening was far worse than the drowning. With the first inhalation of air, my body convulsed, rejecting the water in my lungs.

Someone rolled me onto my side.

I retched, coughed, and inhaled—all in quick succession and repetitively. My lungs cramped. I vomited. Lake water spewed up from deep in my gut. I heard splashing and the rasp of my own breath.

A woman said, "She's coming around."

"Where'd you learn to do that?" a man asked.

The woman replied, "Lifeguard training."

A chime rang out, and the man said, "Aw shit. That raven bastard is close."

"Okay, we need to move. Get ready. When he comes back up, sleep him."

My eyes were blurry and sore. I couldn't stop shivering.

The man said, "We should take her with us."

"Can't," the woman replied. "She's normal."

I couldn't understand. Everything felt dreamlike, and I was sure I was hearing them wrong. The words didn't fit with one another—oil and water. Slippery.

A fit of coughing wracked my body, and I curled into a ball. I was so cold.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. Heat spread outward from the touch, warming me. I wanted to melt into it.

"Here he comes," the woman said. "Do it."

There was a crackle of static and the smell of burned vanilla. I heard a cry of surprise and then another bigger splash.

"Good. Now her."

A man whispered near my ear, "You're going to be okay."

I grabbed at him, but he deflected my hands.

An aromatic wave of vanilla filled my lungs, soothing them, and I slipped into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 8

I awoke in a bed. Something wasn't right, but I had no proof. Bright light cut through my closed eyelids, and I pulled the covers over my head to block it out.

"Good morning, sunshine." Simon's Scottish accent was pronounced.

Simon. I hadn't heard that voice in years, and my stomach lurched. I clutched at the blanket and shoved it against my ears.

"Come now. That's no way to greet an old friend."

I said, "Shut the fuck up," but it came out closer to "Shulla fucka." My brain was full of stinging bees.

"Oh, all right," Simon said. "I can see you need a moment to get your bearings."

"I'm hallucinating. I'm hallucinating." I hated Simon for being the only recognizable element in my nightmare.

I took a deep breath. The aroma of Eau de Hospital clung to the bed, unmistakable. I thought I must be at the Center. I must have snuck in to sleep with Colin. I reached out for him, my fingers spreading as they delved through the linens, but he wasn't there. "Colin?"

"Oh, bloody hell," said Simon.

"Colin?" My throat was raw. I sat up abruptly and threw back the covers.

I slid out of bed, but my legs wouldn't hold me. I collapsed to the floor, and something landed on top of me.

Simon said, "That a girl! Carpe diem."

A sharp pain lit up my arm. An I.V. needle—still—was causing it. Blood oozed from around the needle. It was angled wrong and pushing up my skin. I focused on that pain. Needles, I knew. I kicked up through the confusion and surfaced.

The floor was covered with linoleum, white squares made to mimic marble, a swishing pattern of gray. The swoon went from my head to my stomach, and I hovered on the verge of vomiting.

Hands touched me, pushed the hair out of my face, and lifted my chin. A pinprick of light shined into my eyes, and I turned my face away.

"Help me get her back into bed," said a man, and then raised his voice to add, "Miss Rose, let's get you back into bed," as if I were hard of hearing.

They picked me up. Fingers dug into my armpits.

I wiggled to get away, but they held on tighter.

"Watch the I.V."

The bed caught me. The pillow came up under my head, and I sank into it.

"Miss Rose, your grandfather said he'll be here as soon as he can." The rails on the bed came up one at a time: *cuh-chunk, cuh-chunk*. It was Frankenstein's cell closing.

My eyes shut of their own accord.



Much later, I awoke in the same bed. I remembered the accident, and I lay there for a long time—turning it over and over in my mind. Some of the shock had worn off.

I'd been untethered from the I.V.—no more needles, no more pain. Anxiety lurked at the edge of my consciousness, and I wished for a straight pin. I pushed my thumbnail against the tip of my middle finger, as hard as I could, until pain opened into a bloom of energy that I could focus my mind upon. It kept the panic at bay.

Muffled bings, shuffles, and rumbled conversations came from beyond the closed door. I took another breath, and it felt monumental.

Simon said, "You're feeling better, hm?"

"You're not real." My throat still hurt.

"The police want to talk to you. Lettie's here too, and your grandfather."

"Where's Colin?"

Simon said, "I wish I could say."

"Hello?" I shouted at the world. "I need help in here." While I was searching for the call button, my grandfather entered the room. He had dark circles on his dark circles, and his jowls hung heavier than usual.

Lettie came in next. They flanked me, and Lettie asked, "Are you all in one piece?" She never minced words or shied away from difficult subjects. She was 100% protective earth mother.

I said, "I'm fine. Bruises on my chest."

Lettie leaned over me and pulled at my hospital gown to look. "From the seatbelt?"

"Yeah."

She kissed my forehead. "Jesus, girl. Jesus. I was scared to death. All they'd tell me was that your car went into Clinton Lake and someone brought you here."

Abram cleared his throat.

"I know you're there," Lettie said flatly to him. She was one of the few people in the world Abram Rose couldn't intimidate. She was practically part of the family.

"I didn't *know* anything else," Abram said.

Lettie smoothed the hair back from my face. "Were you driving?"

"Yeah." I studied his face, looking for the answer to my next question before I even dared ask it. It came out as a whisper. "And Colin?"

Abram's expression didn't change. "They're still searching for him."

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right, and yet, I knew I had. "Still searching for him?"

Abram took one of those deep breaths that signaled he had bad news. "Now, don't go crazy on me. All I know is they dove on the car right away." He sounded defensive. "They didn't find him. They think he might've tried to swim out." He picked at a hangnail on his thumb. "They've got

teams walking around the lake. And divers."

My mind took me back to the lake, to the car, to Colin, and us up to our necks in frigid water. His face, so pale and still.

Worry put pressure on my eyeballs.

"You're sure he was in the car with you?" Abram asked.

"What?"

Abram shifted on his feet and used his diplomatic cadence. "I'm just trying to figure out how this could've happened. You're not covering for him, are you, kiddo?"

The bed became unstable. I grabbed the handrail and hung on. "Are you asking if I helped him run away?" It was true that Colin had been committed for his own safety, but Doc Bella had seen progress. Despite the roof incident, she'd allowed our weekend trip.

"The idea's been suggested." Abram licked his lips. "Not by me. By the police."

It made no sense. "It never even occurred to me."

"Okay, settle down," said Abram. "No need to get upset."

I couldn't have disagreed more. I was imagining the searchers giving up because they thought Colin had run off. I pushed the covers off and started to get out of bed.

"Whoa!" said Lettie. "What are you doing?"

"I have to find him." My legs held me this time.

Lettie stepped in front of me. "Honey, that's not your job. The police will find him."

"Please." The pitch of my voice rose. I had no control over it.

Abram cringed visibly.

I softened my tone. "Please."

"I love you. No." Lettie put her hands on my shoulders, warm through the fabric of the hospital gown. "Think for a minute, Viv. What are you going to do? Go out there in the cold and stumble around the lake?"

My mind was racing.

Abram raised his hands. "Okay, okay. Let's calm down. Viviane, you're shivering."

"C'mon." Lettie guided me back onto the bed.

I didn't have the strength to fight her.

Abram broached a new subject. "I heard you had an episode this morning."

"It wasn't an episode," I told him. "I tried to get out of bed too soon. I was half asleep and disoriented."

Abram and I locked eyes for a moment, him trying to figure out if I was lying, and me daring him to suggest it.

A man in a white lab coat entered, interrupting us. "Excuse me. I need a few minutes with Viviane, if you wouldn't mind."

Lettie gave me hugs and kisses before leaving.

Abram squeezed my toes and asked gruffly, "Is there anything you need, kiddo?"

"My sewing kit."



After the doctor left, another strange man came into my hospital room. He had too much beard and too many wrinkles in his khaki pants. His hair, brown and thinning, definitely needed a cut.

I started to ask if I could help him, but he cut me off. "My name's Detective Stace Hayward with the Peoria P.D. I'm here to take your statement about the accident, if you're feeling up to it."

"I guess."

Detective Hayward had a scuffed leather bag slung across his chest. He lifted it off and sat in the room's armchair.

I asked, "Did you find him?"

"You mean Colin Aubrey?"

"Who else?" And we were off to a bad start.

"Not yet." He balanced his bag on his lap. "Frankly, Miss Rose, it makes me nervous. We walked the entire shoreline, dragged out your car, and sent divers in, but we didn't find him." The detective folded his hands on the flat plane of his stomach. On someone else, the gesture would have made him seem relaxed, but for him, it didn't work. His foot gave him away, bobbing with nervous energy.

"You searched the woods?"

His tongue pushed out his bottom lip as if he had a wad of chewing tobacco in there. "Yeah. And we talked to all the residents within a five mile radius. We flew a copter over and put his picture on the TV. We haven't had a single bite. Nobody's seen him."

"People don't just disappear."

"That's the mystery, Miss Rose."

In my ear, Simon said, "Be careful what you say to this man."

I shook my head sharply, "Ssht."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry, not you."

Detective Hayward raised an eyebrow and opened his bag, "Why don't you tell me what happened."

"I picked Colin up at the Center around nine." I described it as I remembered it, right down to the sunshine. As my retelling approached the lake, however, my words faltered. It wasn't that I didn't remember—it was that I didn't want to.

Detective Hayward prompted me. "What caused the accident?"

"There was a man—he ran out into the road. I had to swerve to avoid hitting him."

"Can you describe him?"

The man was a blur in my memory. "It happened so fast. I think he was wearing all black? Dark clothes."

"Was he young? Old? Black? White?"

"Young enough to climb over the guard rail and jump out in front of me, but he wasn't a kid or anything. He was an adult. White, I think. I'm pretty sure I didn't hit him."

Hayward looked up at me, and his eyes were the color of a foggy forest at twilight. "We found your tracks, but we didn't find anything to indicate you'd hit anyone, and nobody has confessed to running into the path of your vehicle. As a matter of fact, we can't find any witnesses at all—except you, of course."

"He was probably the one who got me out."

"Tell me about that."

"There was a woman and a man, maybe two men. It was definitely a man who swam down to the car and pulled me out."

"Except the paramedics found you lying on the shore all by yourself."

I shrugged.

Hayward scrutinized me. He stuck his tongue in his bottom lip, a gesture that seemed to indicate he was thinking. It made it easy to imagine how he must have been as a boy—serious and thoughtful. He said, "Okay. Two, maybe three people were there. They got you out, then instead of going back for Mr. Aubrey, they left—all three of them."

"I think they *did* go back for him."

"Really? Then, where is he?"

"I don't know. Who called the paramedics?"

"Anonymous. It seems they used an untraceable cell phone."

"That must have been them."

"Maybe." Hayward cocked his head to one side. "Tell you what. Let's talk about something else." It was a good idea, until he added, "I heard Colin tried to kill himself."

"He wasn't trying to kill himself," I insisted.

"Hm. I heard he wanted to throw himself off the roof."

"He was trying to fly."

Hayward raised his eyebrows. "Well. I'm glad to hear it wasn't suicide." He made no effort to mask the sarcasm.

"Look. Colin has a mental illness. That doesn't make him suicidal. Colin's not dead. I'd know if he were dead."

"Lady, if I had a laugh for every time I heard that, I'd be Jerry Seinfeld." Hayward leaned forward, his expression very un-funny. "It's unlikely that your fiancé survived without help. There aren't any houses out there—not for miles. Even if he made it to shore, he'd have been soaked to the skin, and temperatures dropped almost to freezing last night. Without help...well..."

I said, "I think you should go."

"Just one more question. People saw you packing up the car at Vince Malum. So, where did Colin's suitcase go?"

"What do you mean? He put it in the trunk."

"Can you explain then, why we found only *your* suitcase in the car?"

"Huh?"

"It's creepy, isn't it? How a man can disappear? Right out from under your nose. What do you think happened?"

I just stared at him, confused.

Eventually, the detective nodded with finality. "We'll keep patrolling the lake." He turned off the recorder and stowed it. With one smooth movement, he rose to his feet and draped the bag's long strap across his chest. "I hope you feel better soon, Miss Rose."

I had no voice.

At the door, the scruffy detective looked back one last time and then left.

I threw back the covers, ran to the bathroom, and was sick in the sink.

CHAPTER 9

I cried myself to sleep after the detective left and was woken by Simon shouting in my ear. "Hide! You have to hide. Now!"

I rolled over and draped an arm on my ear.

Simon's voice moved to the other side of the bed, though I never heard footsteps or rustling fabric or any other sound. It was as if he floated, or maybe he didn't have a body. "I'm serious. You have to hide. They're coming for you."

I pretended I hadn't heard him, and—technically—I hadn't. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Simon was my most persistent hallucination. He'd been my constant companion since junior high and had gotten me into so much trouble—until I learned not to answer him out loud. People talked about kids having imaginary friends as if it were cute, but right about the time you hit puberty, it becomes a lot less adorable.

"Hide!" Simon hissed.

Then someone opened the door.

I rolled to see a man dressed like a TV mortician, complete with pocket watch and silver rose tie pin. He was tall, slim, and well-put-together. His black hair angled down next to one cheek, cut asymmetrically, and eyeliner rimmed his eyes.

"Everyone decent?" He asked in an Irish accent. "Ah yes, I see you are. Pity." The strange visitor crossed to the bed. "Are you Viviane Rose? *The* Viviane Rose?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You can call me Nathan. Most everybody does these days."

I said, "Um, hi?"

He smiled, his teeth extraordinarily straight and white, a contrast with his tanned skin. I wondered if he were an actor. He was certainly dramatic enough.

"So, do you admit to being Viviane Rose or not?" He sounded chipper.

"Yeah, I suppose."

His face changed as if a light had been turned off, and he looked at me with practiced sympathy and sadness. "Then it'll interest you to know that I'm Colin's brother."

I pushed up onto my elbows. "Really?"

"I've been searching for him ever since he disappeared. That would be two years ago now. Our father misses him. It's heart-wrenching to see the poor old man worrying for his eldest. I don't mind telling you, it's taken quite a toll on his health."

"Oh."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "After I saw his picture on the television, I talked to the police. They told me about you."

"Have they found him yet?"

"No, not yet, and it's a tragedy. *You* wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you?" Nathan leaned forward, body language eager.

"I wish I did."

He *tsked* and scanned me as if he might find a clue to Colin's location in the wrinkles of my bed sheets.

I added, "Sorry."

"Reality is never having to say you're sorry, girl. It is what it is." He stepped closer. "By the time I got to the lake, it was swarming with useless people all busy-busy and self-important." He moved in so close his nose nearly touched mine, and I leaned away from him. "I'll find him. It's inevitable." The scent of magnolia bloomed over me. Then, he turned and left without another word, his hard-heeled boots clicking on the linoleum.

He was stalking the moon, and it took me awhile to relax after he was gone.



It was late. I was used to the graveyard shift, so I laid there awake, trying to ignore the bubbling stream of my thoughts.

A chill leaked under the covers with me. I rolled onto my side and curled into a ball. It got colder. I tucked the blanket higher, up to my chin, and pulled it in against my back. The blanket slid to one side, uncovering my feet. I yanked it back into place and settled down again.

Finally, I must have dozed, because when I came awake, it was sudden. The room was freezing cold, and my feet were once again in the open air. I never slept without covering my feet, not even in the hottest weeks of summer. It was a habit I'd developed as a kid. As long as my feet remained covered, nothing nasty could crawl into bed with me.

I opened my eyes.

I was not alone.

A woman was lying on the bed beside me, looking back at me. Her gray hair was alive. She had one hand on my breast, her touch icy through the hospital gown.

I didn't react. I'd learned never to react. I just looked at her while my insides roiled with fear.

She dropped her jaw, revealing the blackened, toothless interior of her mouth.

I couldn't move.

Her hand slid upward until her frigid fingers touched the base of my throat, and her eyes—the pupils void, black holes, dark matter—they sucked in everything she looked at. They were sucking me in, and her hand crawled up the underside of my jaw and over my chin. She began to envelop me, wrapping a leg over mine and inserting her other hand under my neck. She cradled the back of my head. Wherever she touched me, she was solid, then not solid, tickling, as if made of feathery tendrils or tentacles that stretched and retracted. Her expression alternated between passion and dispassion. She wanted me, but she didn't give a damn.

Her hand covered my mouth, and she pressed her body against mine. All I could smell was crisp, cold air. I breathed her in involuntarily, her misty presence invading my nostrils, freezing them, expanding into my sinus cavities and violating my lungs.

I heard a sound in my mind, but not in my ears. It was the sound of metal tearing.

The hag closed off my nostrils.

I had no control over my own body. I couldn't get away or fight.

That terrible, high-pitched shriek didn't stop.

I went to a different time and place, to the Center's basement, to the long concrete hall. Colin had been there, shushing me.

I'd tried to shove him away.

"Stop it, Viv. Stop it. She'll hear us."

He crushed me, pushed his hand against my nostrils. "She'll kill you if she finds you."

My throat clenched. My diaphragm spasmed. And then, I was in my bed, in the hospital room.

"She's gone." Simon was right next to my ear, barely whispering.

I swam as hard as I could to the surface of my mind and sucked in a lungful of air.

The room was dark, my heart pounding. Several layers of blanket covered me and my feet. I pushed up on one elbow and turned on the bedside lamp. I needed to see every corner, every angle, every inch of the room.

"It's all right," Simon said. "She's gone."

I couldn't help it. It started as a sob and ended as a scream. I needed to scream, because I could and because I hadn't been able to while that creature had had me pinned and dying.

The people in white coats rushed in.

I remembered her touch, the tickle of her fingers as they crawled over my eyelids, insisting they shut, willing me to die, and I couldn't stop screaming.

They tried to give me a shot, but I fought them. They held me down and forced me to take it. Then, I fought sleep instead, and I was successful—for a while.

Thank You from the Author

If you enjoyed this preview of STALKING THE MOON, a peripheral novelette to this book, titled “Charlie Darwin, or the Trine of 1809,” is available for free download at WyrldwoodAngel.com.

About the Author



Angel Leigh McCoy has worn many faces, told many stories, loved many people, and lived many lives. Through it all, writing has been her one constant.

Angel is a spark of creative force behind the epic [Dire Multiverse](https://diremultiverse.com) (<https://diremultiverse.com>) and this darkly fanciful [Wyrddwood Project](http://wyrddwoodangel.com/) (<http://wyrddwoodangel.com/>). She's an award-winning video game writer, having worked on "CONTROL," IGN's Game of the Year 2019. Prior to that, she spent ten years weaving intricate tales for millions of *Guild Wars 2* fans. As a writer for White Wolf's *World of Darkness*, she created stories about vampires, changelings, mages, and werewolves.

Her whirlwind is gathering momentum at AngelMcCoy.com.

Mental Health Resources

- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>) – speak with a real person (US). (1-800-273-8255)
- Suicide.org – list of international suicide hotlines in many countries
- [Help When You Need It](http://helpwhenyouneedit.org/) (<http://helpwhenyouneedit.org/>) – a directory of services available all over the US.
- [HearingVoices.org](https://www.hearingvoicesusa.org/) – a network of people who hear voices and those who love them. (US (<https://www.hearingvoicesusa.org/>) or UK (<http://www.hearing-voices.org/>))
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Help-Line/Top-HelpLine-Resources) (<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Help-Line/Top-HelpLine-Resources>) – a directory of helpline resources (US)
- Checkpoint.org – an international list of services and help lines. “Wherever you are, whatever you need.”

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