

2021-12-01

The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox (A Novel)

Leah Elizabeth Robinson
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robinson, Leah Elizabeth, "The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox (A Novel)" (2021). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 3447.

https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/3447

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

THE CURSED CHILD AND THE TRICKSTER FOX (A NOVEL)

LEAH ELIZABETH ROBINSON

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Tim Z. Hernandez, M.F.A., Chair

Nelson Cardenas, Ph.D.

Lisa Mims-Devezin, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Leah Elizabeth Robinson

2021

THE CURSED CHILD AND THE TRICKSTER FOX (A NOVEL)

by

LEAH ELIZABETH ROBINSON

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Liberal Arts

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2021

Acknowledgements

For Karen L. Robinson, my mother, thank you for seeing what I couldn't see. I am genuinely grateful for the support and guidance of so many people in my life. In addition, I have experienced a growth in confidence and skill under the tutelage of the Department of Creative Writing's faculty at the University of Texas at El Paso. Every class opened my eyes to a wealth of information which I am beyond grateful to have had the opportunity to explore. I owe a special thanks to Tim Hernandez, Nelson Cardenas, and Sasha Pimentel. They have shown me a multitude of support and made a long-lasting impression, even though they may never know the extent of how much I've valued their opinions. Finally, a special thanks go to Dr. Lisa Mims-Devezin for declaring, "I will participate, even if I need to walk through fire." because that statement alone shows your character and generosity. My mother, I owe the most gratitude to you. You have been my biggest cheerleader, never wavering when I lacked the confidence to pursue my dreams. You've always said, "I could do anything if I stopped being my biggest critic," and you're right. It's been a hard-won battle to get this far, and I appreciate all the sacrifices you've made and the love and support you have given me.

Table of Content

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Preface.....	ivi
Works Cited	xxi
The Cursed and The Trickster Fox (A Novel)	1
Chapter 1: Streetcars and the Strange	2
Chapter 2: What You Know and What You Dream and Everything in Between.....	20
Chapter 3: A Card Burns a Hole in My Pocket and Burned Bridges	33
Chapter 4: What You Will and What You Won't Do.....	45
Chapter 5: Stranger Danger and White Lies	57
Chapter 6: Blow for Blows, Who Hurts More?	71
Chapter 7: Something Amiss	86
Chapter 8: Are You Friend or Foe?	101
Chapter 9: Who is Frankie?	110
Chapter 10: Blades and Cuts.....	119
Chapter 11: A Price for Insanity	126
Chapter 12: We All Have to Face the World.....	132
Vita.....	137

Preface

Scope of the Project

Gottschall states, “The human imperative to make and consume stories runs even more deeply than literature, dreams, and fantasy. We are soaked to the bone in story.” (Gottschall, 18). My project, *The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox*, is a fictional representation of the stigma of mental illness in the black community. A subject that is “soaked to the bone” in my own experiences of both mental illness and the mental illness stigma. The mental illness stigma isn’t as cut and dry as one might imagine, nor is this a stigma that pertains solely to the black community. Still, layers of circumstances and situations like onion peels shroud mental illness negatively among black people. It’s a hushed subject, one kept closely between teeth and tongue. It’s whispered and tauntingly snickered at as a mark of shame and weakness. And I have often wondered why? What are the complexities that have led to this stigma?

As a writer, I began to address the complexities of this stigma by turning the microscopic lens onto myself so that my narrative truly represents the illness and the stigma. And, by no means is this an easy task because we write what we see, hear, and know, which comes at the price of being exposed. I’m pretty transparent now about my bipolar disorder with family and people in general, not seeing a reason to hide my condition or fearing the backlash, and there’s a lot of backlash for being open. Even so, there are still wounding moments that I’d like to forget. Still, as Gottschall claims, “We tell some of the best stories to ourselves.” (Gottschall, 18), and so I have had to examine my story first, the mental illness, the stressors, my community, etc. In turn, I conceptualized my main character, Frankie sharing aspects of my life, bipolar disorder, and of course, the response of her illness by the community, not excluding her family.

I am a product of my environment, and we know that our environments are subjectively different and ethnically so. Collectively, black people are products of their environment, molded by the black community that is still often excluded or on the fringe of American society. Not to mention, the scarred history of black people in this nation still projects onto every aspect of our lives. And, our environment imparts positive and negative experiences, which then shape an individual's perspective. While being excluded from the mainstream "white" American society, black people believe specific issues like mental illness don't pertain to them and are exclusive to other ethnic groups. Thus, we've constructed a "social glue" (Gottschall, 28) in our narrative or story of what pertains solely to our community.

My Novel, *The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox*, focuses on Frankie Marchand, a woman child who has bipolar disorder with psychotic features. Frankie has lost her mother, father, and twin brother in a tragic accident, for which she is the sole survivor. However, this accident isn't the reason for her disorder. The disorder is already present. There is no set cause for bipolar disorder; it's thought to be a combination of many factors such as genetics, environment, brain structure, and chemistry and causes significant mood changes. Because there's not a set cause for this mental illness, it allows me certain freedoms to use this trauma as a stressor. Her life undergoes a drastic change that delivers stressors like grief, strained communication and or relationships, lack of acceptance and support. Sadly, Grandma Fran and Uncle Auggie, her remaining family, are from an older generation, viewing mental illness as a weakness or a lack of faith. This older generation's response to mental illness factors past mistreatment of blacks under doctor supervision and views certain illnesses as exclusive to other ethnicities. As Frankie's grandma likes to claim, mental illness is not a black people issue. So,

any delusions or hallucinations that Frankie experiences are either dismissed or a subject of criticism. It leaves Frankie vulnerable to destructive ways to cope.

The setting of my novel is in New Orleans, Louisiana, fixated on various places in the city and an in-patient hospital setting. Louisiana is filled with brutal histories, ghosts, religion, and Cajun folklore, granting me the creative freedom to influence Frankie's delusions and hallucinations. The idea is to present magical realism existing parallel to the actions of the real world. Yet, I am attempting to make these elements harder to distinguish from the hallucination. There are five types of hallucinations: visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory, and tactile. Frankie experiences a mixture of the five types triggered randomly. I've decided to have the several characters play different roles interchangeably. They are viewed differently depending on whether their part is in the hallucination or not. Frankie transforms "real" people into images of things she's read or believes. So, doctors take on the persona of people of power in Voodoo, for example, Barron Samedi and Maman Brigitte. Therefore, the trickster fox plays the part of the devil's advocate. Leviticus Wright (Fox or Levi) plays a dual role, one that he seems to encourage Frankie crumbling mental state. The character follows Native American and Asian folklore of fox spirits, a natural trickster able to guide or bring an omen of misfortune. Because of this, Leviticus is curious and is willing to exploit for his benefit, which plays into the idea that mental illness is synonymous with weakness.

My purpose and intent for writing *The Cursed Child and the Trickster Fox* are to showcase the disease and its existence in the black community. Additionally, I want to show how the mental illness stigma has caused devastating factors via ignorance and fear for those unaware of their conditions and those with mental illness afraid to treat their disease beyond church council. Finally, I want to explore the issues that have resulted in this stigmatization. In this

preface, I will further discuss why I've chosen this topic and title, specifically the use of the word curse, and why I have chosen the novel form. My goal is to offer insight and representation for a topic still being evaluated by the black community.

Story and Form Choice

Above, I've mentioned countless times that the black community and its tumultuous history in America have imparted specific ideas regarding mental illness. Hence, the stigma begins with teaching past experiences, but I have been vague on how. We, black people, have passed on the collective trauma of enslavement, segregation, racism, and microaggressions. Collective trauma is "when a traumatic occurrence happens to an entire group of people and impacts them in much the same way" (choosingtherapy.com). However, this collective trauma transcends into Transgenerational or intergenerational trauma because of how the effect is experienced by "subsequent generations" (goodtherapy.org).

As a child, I realized now that I was a sponge soaking up the stories of my elders, their plights, which had also been stories shared with them. But, unfortunately, they were often stories filled with mistreatment and mistrust. I had internalized stories of my grandmother being spit on while walking on the street near the sidewalk of a white's only park because even that was too close. Jim Crow laws had stifled and subjected the black community to living in fear. I remember how she mentioned certain hospitals in the city being unsafe for blacks. And while I don't know the hospitals and no longer have my grandmother's memory due to Alzheimer's disease, I know that we have historical documentation of medical experimentation on blacks. J. Marion Sims gynecology experiments on enslaved black women, 1920s to 1970s forced sterilization of women, and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study has led to generations of fears linked to medical

treatment. These conversations are presented to Frankie and used passive-aggressively to cull her condition. It's PTSD of sorts or "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," as Dr. Joy DeGruy has titled her book, and it explores the trauma of enslaved blacks to ensure the health of future generations of black people. I asked myself: why is this so important?

Towards the end of eighth grade at a predominantly black catholic school in 2001, I went to my first psychiatric visit, a pivotal moment in my life where confronting the idea of being less than "normal" was a crushing blow. At the age of thirteen, I had already formed my thoughts regarding the medical profession based on my mistrust owed to my physical limitations caused by a doctor. In addition, of course, I had the influences of my grandmother's point of view on doctors not being "worth shit." However, my mother thought otherwise due to her working for a psychiatrist. My mother read the literature provided in the office and had probably self-diagnosed herself before moving on to me. While my mother never thought to help herself, she decided that the best thing to do was help me, which may be one of the most progressive moves for someone raised in my religious family. And I resented her for it because I was thirteen, and I associated her job with "crazy" or where the "crazy folk" went. I hadn't wanted to be labeled crazy. I knew the "crazy" label would force distance between me and my environment. Crazy people were a separate entity to be viewed cautiously. However, I did have issues that I began to unravel, attesting to my flip-flop in moods, which led to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder two years later. There's fear in the unknown and in discovering things about yourself. It's even more terrifying to know that the mental illness doesn't turn off or is cured with a pill or chat with your doctor or even a prayer. It's a life sentence, and that in itself is suffocating, but the pressure continues to build when you add in the perception of everyone around you. Therein lies the reason for the usage of the word cursed.

And so, this story is not only a representation of mental illness and stigma but an explanation for my own experiences. Vargas Llosa's "Letter's to a Young Novelist" states: "My impression is that life—a big word, I know—inflicts themes on a writer through certain experiences that impress themselves on his consciousness or subconscious and later compel him to shake himself free by turning them into stories." (Vargas Llosa,17). Subconsciously, I believe, I've been looking to explain things that have indeed affected my life. Still, I am present enough to realize that this situation goes further than my personal experience, that the story is not mine alone to tell, but to narrate a subject the many are afraid to speak. Through fiction, I can, in a sense, remove myself and form a barrier between my experience and the story.

Approaching this subject has been difficult, in that the voices of the illness aren't just the mentally ill, but those forced to confront their loved ones with the disease, to not understand, yet have to care. Therefore, I have chosen to engage this issue while using the narrative method of the Chinese box or frame narrative. There are stories that each character can connect to the disease; as Vargas Llosa states, "it is rare and almost impossible for a novel to have only one narrator." (Vargas Llosa,55). Hence, three characters are narrating this story. Surprisingly, I haven't chosen to convey through Levi (Fox). Instead, I've decided to use Cassandra, a character with a close relationship with Levi. She and Frankie's uncle, Uncle Auggie, give an objective perspective of reality, her with a medical view and Uncle Auggie an older generation connecting the dots where his sister, Fran, won't. They are present in Frankie's story but removed to voice separate but related stories. However, this doesn't affect Levi's role as devil's advocate. He is a lead in Frankie's narrative.

Framework

The Chinese box is a nest of stories, a narrative inside another. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" implemented the Chinese box method, narrating their stories to express themes that provoked emotions depending on each narration. For example, Wuthering Height depicted mental and physical cruelty, the challenges of their social structure, and the savagery of love. I thought the format was conducive to explaining the strained ideas between very different perspectives, showcasing mental illness, stigma, and strained relationships. That way, each story tends to impart an observation-like view of mental illness. My character Cassandra's medical background gives her the ability to understand the illness, the fracturing of the mind but still puzzled by who it affects, Frankie.

Throughout my studies at The University of Texas at El Paso, I've read countless works of fiction that showcase similar literary techniques; however, they are contextual differences due to cultural significance. They honor the tradition and experience of that writer. Our identity is at the forefront of our work, so I had to delve into literature that may not have necessarily centered on mental illness. Still, they had themes that clung to certain aspects of the scope of my project. Toni Morrison's books center on African American themes, where her characters experience an unjust society and struggle to find their identity. I reviewed Toni Morrison's book "Beloved" and how she addressed the atrocity of slavery through a fictional adaptation of Margaret Garner's story of murder and the attempted murder of her children to save them from being enslaved again. I believe this insane act is enforced by trauma, possibly the mind fragmenting by stress. Morrison writes the character of Sethe as an unstable woman burdened by guilt which borders on madness with the introduction of the character Beloved. There was a line in particular that struck a chord; Morrison states, "Sweet, crazy conversations full of half sentences, daydreams and

misunderstandings more thrilling than understanding could be.” (Morrison,67). This line is the first omission of insanity. I viewed the character of Beloved and all those craving her attention warped by several mental illnesses and her appearance like a shared hallucination until Beloved becomes no more. “Beloved” not only shows insanity but the social construct of their community. Morrison shows Sethe living on the fringe, her family shunned by the community due to the horrors of her actions.

Gottschall states, “memories we use to form our own life stories are boldly fictionalized,” (Gottschall, 18). And I’ve taken this to mean interpretation. I say this because of how we all individually interpret subjects and actions. For example, in fictionalizing a documented history as Morrison did, we see the double edge sword of Margaret Garner’s actions through Sethe. It’s easier to swallow the horror because we interpret Sethe’s character, and the narration garners some sympathy. In considering my story development, I wanted to have my reader interpret the persistently administered tensions on those that don’t fit in the so-call box of normalcy because we individually define normal. Not only should we interpret normalcy for ourselves, but I also hope that readers will see how the aspect of “the veil” and “double consciousness,” (DuBois, 38) terms used by W.E.B DuBois, factors into our opinions even in modern society. Double consciousness “is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression” (plato.stanford.edu). The theory that we, black people, have viewed ourselves through the eyes of our oppressors and warred with our personal view of self.

I’ve chosen to model my story in the literary method of the Chinese box; however, I would like to use Reeves’s style of dialogue for demonstrating mental illness. Reeves’s “Bleeding Violet” masterfully, in my opinion, incorporates the internal dialogue of Hanna and

her dead father. The discussion below shows how Reeves writes the internal conversation of father and daughter and projects madness in Hanna's description of her actions against Aunt Ulla. Reeves writes,

“Whose blood is that?”

Tell her, Poppa encouraged. I guarantee she won't care.

“It's Aunt Ulla's blood,” I said. “I hit her on the head with a rolling pin.”

I risked another glance into her face. Nothing.

Told you.

“And?” Rosalee prompted.

Did she want *details*?

“Aunt Ulla's blood spurted everywhere, onto my dress, into my eyes.” I blinked hard in remembrance. “It burned.” I fingered the smidges at the waist. “I thought I'd cleaned myself up, but apparently—” (Reeves,12)

Hallucinations plagued this character, her actions ruthless but told in such a childish manner that it punctuates the character's illness. In addition, Reeves shows the dysfunction in Hanna's mind and gives a curiously weird setting with secrets to make Hanna appear less of an outcast while showing the overall theme of the character desiring to be loved.

I've imagined that my character Levi (Fox) is like Reeves's depiction of Hanna's father, her father being a voice of reason, and Levi (Fox) being the little angel or devil on Frankie's shoulder, ushering in her hallucinations. Below is an example of Levi and Frankie's interaction in a hallucination:

MOVE AWAY! A deep voice bellowed in my head, so loudly that I stumbled to my knees, clutched my ears in my hands, and knocked into a tall man sandwiched

between me and the side of a wooden seat. The man turned and sneered and shoved me away.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized over and over again. After a while, the apology became a chanted whisper before the voice spoke again.

YOU’RE IN DANGER! When the streetcar stops, get off quickly and run. Do not turn back to look at the sin eaters. You’ve attracted them to you, already. The deep voice demanded.

“WHAT? I DIDN’T MEAN TO!” I shouted out again. Who the hell was speaking to me? There weren’t any mouths moving, but the voice sounded as clear as a bell inside my head. I wonder if anyone else could hear, or was it just me?

(Robinson,4-5)

Their interaction is the hallucination, but Frankie views this as an incident in her reality. And while the representation of the stigma of mental illness in the black community is needed, I hope to impart the theme of wanting acceptance and understanding. Stigma is a mark of disgrace that forces separation and becomes heightened by ignorance. According to Snyder, “Those with a limited understanding of mental illness are frightened, annoyed, and sometimes amused by Schizophrenics.” and here we see how ignorance is deeply destructive, abusive, and isolating. This quote is why I have Uncle Auggie trying to breach the barrier and connect to his great-niece’s plight. But, unfortunately, the stigma continues through Grandma Fran, who wields the Bible like a pistol condemning Frankie and her illness which demonstrates ignorance and fear.

Wielding the Bible like a pistol might sound like an extremist attitude, but this is an example of this stigma’s cause, interpretation, or misinterpretation. The black community has a long history and relationship with religion. Black people have interpreted the Bible scriptures to

explain their oppression and suffering. The scriptures often deliver hope and answers for situations that seem to have none. I don't question religion or someone's faith, but I saw how religious views greatly affected mental illness as I researched this stigma. Mental illness is often viewed negatively by the church and also deemed evil because of some factors like suicidal ideation. Walker states, "church pastors were asked their opinions about Black suicide. They responded by saying that suicide was a denial of black identity and culture." which I believe has to do with interpretation or misinterpretation of Bible scriptures, and again with W.E.B Dubois's theory of double consciousness. It also goes against the idea of black people's strength and endurance and their ability to persevere. Maybe, due to my upbringing in an equally sinful and religious city, I've chosen to incorporate Voodoo, a religion often criticized and misunderstood because it combines Catholicism and African traditions. I am attempting to show misinterpretation further and have this religion be the crux to which Frankie holds onto mentally for, "Voodoo embraces and encompasses the entirety of human experience. It is practiced by people who are imperfect and may use religion for their own purposes." (huffpost.com).

The idea that we cling to an identity so tightly that we can't allow ourselves to see the flaws or how it silences those who fall wayside is stunning. Still, I've used this blindness, so to speak, as a defining characteristic for Grandma Fran. I don't intend for her character to become a villain, but her actions and words villainize Frankie, and in the past, Frankie's mother. So Grandma Fran is not a villain, but she is a stressor due to her beliefs and ignorance. And while Grandma Fran is clinging to the so-called black identity or her interpretation of mental illness, we have characters who forward my story to a place of understanding. It may be a tightrope journey, where emotions fluctuate between irritation, anger, and sadness, but it is a journey nonetheless or even an awakening.

Throughout the construction of *The Cursed Child and the Trickster Fox*, I have had to uncover many issues to convey a stigma still being addressed by the black community. It's been an awakening, of course, but a struggle. I have biases towards some of the issues that have separated the mentally ill from the black community because we must educate ourselves in matters that we don't understand. Still, I also realized that cycles or generational curses are hard to break. Often these beliefs cycle as a misguided attempt to guard oneself against larger-scale issues from a society that excluded them based on racial separation. I have felt like I've flip-flopped between understanding the plight and not, confused by my own experience and the factual evidence of the rise in mental illness in the black community, and again why we've chosen to put on blinders. Even still, I have constantly felt that my flip-flopping contradicts everything that I have researched.

How do I impart these issues in a work of fiction when we haven't conclusively addressed the problem in reality? I have included religion, an older generation, and a medical perspective, yet I haven't shown enough. A representation feels lacking, and I feel like there is so much more that I am missing and can incorporate, but I've struggled with how. When Frankie hallucinates about foxes and merges the stereotypical Hollywood views of Voodoo with the actual religion, how does that address mental illness? Hallucinations vary from person to person, and the length of time one spends in a hallucination differs. Even so, I desire to have something more concrete. Do Frankie's hallucinations give insight into the issues? Does it normalize mental illness?

Vargas Llosa states, "Fiction is a lie covering up a deep truth: it is life as it wasn't, life as men and women of a certain age wanted to live it and didn't and thus had to invent." (Vargas Llosa, 8) when regarding this statement, I have indeed invented this lie. I wrote a lie that

encompasses my want for understanding that I hadn't personally experienced—the idea of having mental illness upfront and not hidden behind another storyline. I wanted to establish a relationship between Uncle Auggie and Frankie that would lead one to look outwards while the other dealt with the condition head-on. There's no doubt that the relationship and bond experiences strain, but they can weather the storm. Frankie's character needs to have a semblance of stability in the form of familial and in-patient medical care, which addresses the importance of seeking mental health help.

By far, the most challenging factor of writing *The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox* is the contextual relevance and the literary form. I envisioned this novel as a Chinese box where it's told from several points of view of reality, hallucination, and delusion. However, I am still uncertain if the frame narrative is the best way to showcase mental illness. In addition, I don't know if I am limiting Frankie's story by not solely focusing on her point of view. She is the main character, but I've started the story with Cassandra's point of view at the forefront. Even though Cassandra starts the narration, her focus is on Frankie, the patient, that hasn't been mentally present while in her care at the mental health facility. The novel continuously shifts between points of view and various experiences. I thought having these shifts in voices would allow us to see the illness inwards and outwards. I need to show how relationships develop or dissolve under tension. I need to show how these individuals live and even cope while presented with mental illness. Yet, I wonder if I lose Frankie's view on her relationships which is one of the most critical aspects of the novel.

In Uncle Auggie's point of view, we see resentment, anger, and sadness. Still, he's the character who brings the possibility of change in a generation where misinterpretation and mistrust have governed them. However, I've questioned whether his voice is integral to Frankie.

Then again, he is a member of her family and shares a bond with Frankie. His point of view also showcases two very different settings, their home and the mental facility. And then we have Frankie, who isn't present or has little moments of cognitive presence in the other characters' reality. She narrates her story as if she is living alongside her family, which she is not. As I explain this, I realize that this may work, which makes me believe this is self-doubt because I'm still in the "getting dressed" (Vargas Llosa,16) stage of my novel.

Another trial-and-error issue I had while writing was whether or not to write the novel in the first person or third person. I originally wrote my book in the third person, presenting Frankie through the narrator's view. However, the third-person point of view felt too distant and impersonal, even though it is easier to write descriptions in the third person, in my opinion. I wanted Frankie's voice to be the focal point, stating how she felt and discerning how mental illness affected her life. The Chinese box seemed to incorporate better in the first person. So, I've written chapters repeatedly to fix scenes and descriptions previously written in the third person. These scenes have drastically changed within the storyline because of the choice of narrators.

Although I've had these moments of self-doubt and trials-and- errors with the Chinese box narrative and point of view, I've seen this as a form of experimentation. I've experimented with the very structure of the novel and even the storyline. And I adapted as needed to benefit the flow and pace of my book. Like Gaimen states in "Anansi's Boys,"

"Stories are like spiders, with all they long legs, and stories are like spiderwebs, which man gets himself all tangled up in but which look so pretty when you see them under a leaf in the morning dew, and in the elegant way that they connect to one another, each to each." (Gaimen,45).

And like those spiders creating spiderwebs, I've allowed mental illness to create a web connecting various people to Frankie, weaving its effects on those witnessing her psychotic break. The mind is infinitely more complex than any web, and though we know that mental illness exists, we have yet to unravel the how, what, and why. So, in a way, if stories are like spiderwebs that we get tangled in, then my novel *The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox* is the unraveling of Frankie.

Works Cited

- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*. Temple University Press, 2009.
- Blackman, Marci. *Po Man's Child: A Novel*. Manic D Press, 1999.
- Bruce, Marino A., and Darnell Felix Hawkins. *Inequality, Crime and Health Among African American Males*. Emerald, 2019.
- DeGruy, Joy, and Randall Robinson. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of ENDURING Injury and Healing*. Joy DeGruy Publications Inc., 2018. .
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 2020.
- Franco, Dr. Fabiana. "Understanding Intergenerational Trauma: An Introduction for Clinicians." *GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog*, 7 Jan. 2021, https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/Understanding_Intergenerational_Trauma.
- Gaimen, Neil. *Anansi Boys: A Novel*. William Morrow, 2021.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Mariner Books, 2013.
- Haas, Saumya Arya. "What Is Voodoo? Understanding a Misunderstood Religion." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 25 May 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-is-vodou_b_827947.
- Hazzard, Vanessa, et al. *The Color of Hope: People of Color Mental Health Narratives*. Self-Published, 2015.
- LMHC, Written by: Rachel Larson, and Reviewed by: Trishanna Sookdeo MD. "Collective Trauma: Definition, Effects, & How to Heal." *Choosing Therapy*, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/collective-trauma/>.
- McCormick, Patricia. *Cut*. Push, 2011.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2020.
- Pittman, John P. "Double Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 21 Mar. 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>.
- Reeves, Dia. *Bleeding Violet*. Simon Pulse, 2010.
- Snyder, Aaren. *Black Mental Health Matters: The Ultimate Guide for Mental Health Awareness in the Black Community*. Majestic Publishing, 2020.

Spandler, Helen, et al. *Madness, Distress and the Politics of Disablement*. Policy Press, 2015.

Walker, Rheeda. *The Unapologetic Guide to Black Mental Health: Navigate an Unequal System, Learn Tools for Emotional Wellness, and Get the Help You Deserve*. New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2020.

Williams, Terrie M. *Black Pain: It Just Looks like We're Not Hurting: Real Talk for When There's Nowhere to Go but Up*. Scribner, 2009.

The Cursed Child and The Trickster Fox
A Novel

Streetcars and the Strange

Chapter One

“Cassandra, she’s sat there for hours, now.” Matthew said with his arms crossed over his cheery white cat scrubs. “A little after serving her breakfast, and administering her meds, she dragged that chair to the window. She’s been staring out all day at the storm. I don’t think she’s moved an inch.” He huffed and looked through the small observation window. I could see just how agitated he was becoming, his shoulders drawn tight, his nose flared, and he hovered over his wards like a mother hen.

A tuft of auburn hair over the back of the chair was all we saw—the only pop of color in the sterile room. White sheets, fluorescent lights, faded shades of gray tiles, the room was depressing, to say the least, and I often wonder how conducive this environment was to healing. How could all this gloomy gray inspire any positive emotions? I remember the first day, after working an entire shift, Matthew ordered every happy-looking unisex scrub he could find in doubles, “We have to liven this place up. Them damn gray walls for damn sure won’t.” My brother and his bleeding heart, so sensitive to every little problem. I listened to Matthew speak about how the girl seemed to regress after visitation. It wasn’t the first time I had seen patients who’ve made progress regress, and the girl had only begun.

I didn’t say anything to him. There wasn’t anything for me to say. I moved past Matthew, making my way into the room. I knew my brother lingered outside the door, watching to see if there would be any change. I wasn’t hopeful. I had only ever seen her mouth twitch a little, saw her eyes make contact for a few short seconds, but other than her opening her mouth for me as I administered her nightly medication, I rarely saw anything. It was my brother Matthew who managed to get the girl to respond. I always wondered if it was the shell-shocking difference in

our appearances and personalities. He was a rarity among the staff, a snow-white albino with a bubbly, easy-going attitude opposite my dark as night skin and hair and seriousness. She spoke to him once, called him the white kitty, and asked him why the black kitty only came at night. I remembered how my brother grinned like a Cheshire cat, and I laughed. It was good to know that she was aware of us, even if she had only chosen to speak with him.

“It’s time for your medicine,” I said and walked towards the chair. “Let’s move you to the bed. Get you more comfortable and ready to sleep. Are you tired?”

She said nothing.



“Young lady, would you like my seat?” asked the older gentleman seated before me.

I shook my head; a light spray of moisture flew from my hair with my frantic motions, gesturing awkwardly with my braced right hand for the older gentleman to continue to stay seated. In his late seventies, the man was well dressed in pressed clothing, albeit a little soggy, but the four-prong cane and the brace on the gentleman’s knee meant he needed the seat far more than I did. I clutched on the brown leather strap hanging from the railing, braced myself by spreading my feet on the black traction grooved floor, and hoped to God that I wouldn’t stumble on anyone, especially the nice man.

It had been raining all day. According to the weatherman, a storm in the Gulf had sent torrential rains to New Orleans all week, and it would continue into the weekend. Unfortunately, for everyone riding N.O. public transportation, this guaranteed delays and drenched passengers. I had experienced both, waiting on the streetcar today after attending my Thursday appointment with Dr. Gary Warner. The streetcar traveled as quickly as the driver dared down the track, picking up more soggy passengers to sardine pack onto the car. I did not mind the crowded car.

My mind liked to wander, and I was already seeing the conversation with Dr. Warner replay. The brown paper bag filled with samples of Lexapro in my book sack seemed to cement the visit. Heatedly, during the thirty-minute session, Dr. Warner said, “Frankie, grief and mental illness aren’t signs of weakness or abnormality.” And I had disagreed and had expressed how the family viewed me as broken or cracked. And I argued venomously that one hallucination could drive a rift between people like crazy was contagious and spread through the air as a cough would. The session ended with us at a standoff. After all, Dr. Warner couldn’t press the point; unlike I, he had never experienced it.

A few people and I were startled by a thunderous boom, and a baby shrieked his displeasure. Outside the windows, everything was blurred gray by thick sheets of rain. The lights flickered in and out on the streetcar for a few seconds. Then, something flashed in the flickering lights and drew my attention. I peered out the corner of my eye and saw these glints of gold from two passengers in the rear. At first, I thought it was a trick of the eye, maybe because of the flickering lights, but as I turned my head slightly more to the right, I saw something strange. In the back of the streetcar, the eyes appeared gilded gold, bugged-out, and resembled the bottom of glass soda bottles in hollowed faces. The bugged-eyed figure sat across from another with the same eyes. This time I turned my head slightly more to the side, resting it along my shoulder, and peered at the other. Its hands were curved, skinny like a skeleton, bone-thin and garish, more like claws than fingers. They were attached to an overweight man who seemed to sleep completely unaware of the creatures sitting next to him, eating him. Clawed fingers raked along flesh, drawing back and forward as the figure’s mouth clamped on to his neck. Wicked sharp teeth slowly pulled wisps of silver light away from the thick neck. “What the hell?” I whispered. I had never seen anything like this before. The figure, no creature, slowly drew out and chewed

the wisp of light from fatty flesh. The overweight man's ruddy skin color disappeared with each pull of that silvery light until it turned ash white.

"Stop... STOP!" I shouted as I forced my way through the crowd to the back of the streetcar. The man slumped over, but the creatures still clawed at his flesh. The only thing I could think to do was swing my book sack at them, nearly hitting a woman behind me with how wildly I swung.

"It's another fucking crazy. Every damn time, I swear the streetcar carries more drunks and crazies. We got two more stops before Canal Street." A woman grumped from two seats away.

"Don't you see them?" I asked the crowd. No one answered me. They shuffled away as much as the crowded streetcar would allow, some muttering crazy under their breaths, and others ignored me.

Why didn't anyone see? They were eating the man alive. I had seen it. I had seen every pull of life leave his body. It was something I don't think I would ever forget. Something that would haunt me, but the crowd moved away from me as if I had swung at air. I stared back at the creatures, and the man slumped on the wooden bench. A chittering sound came from one of the creature's mouths, a click of teeth against teeth.

MOVE AWAY! A deep voice bellowed in my head, so loudly that I stumbled to my knees, clutched my ears in my hands, and knocked into a tall man sandwiched between me and the side of a wooden seat. The man turned and sneered and shoved me away.

"I'm sorry," I apologized over and over again. After a while, the apology became a chanted whisper before the voice spoke again.

YOU'RE IN DANGER! When the streetcar stops, get off quickly and run. Do not turn back to look at the sin eaters. You've attracted them to you, already. The deep voice demanded.

“WHAT? I DIDN'T MEAN TO!” I shouted out again. Who the hell was speaking to me? There weren't any mouths moving, but the voice sounded as clear as a bell inside my head. I wonder if anyone else could hear, or was it just me.

“END OF THE LINE! EVERYONE OFF!” The driver yelled.

Several people stood before me shuffling to the exit, but I pushed and shoved my way through the crowd, angering people who hurled curses on my way out. I ran through the crowded sidewalks of Canal Street, up long city blocks, bumping and stumbling through poncho-covered sightseers and hotel workers. The soles of my shoes pounded the pavement, splashed through puddles on the sidewalk, and the street until I reached the corner of Magazine and Canal. I tried to catch my breath at the red light before running across the street. The Elysian Fields bus awaited a block away at the intersection of Canal and North Peters. The bus driver was ready to close the double doors and pull off when I stepped in, huffing and puffing. Dark auburn curly hair lay matted on my face and dripped soggly down the purple raincoat I wore. I sat focused out the window in the closest seat near the driver and the door. My heart pounded against my ribcage painfully. The rain and sweat and the bus's air condition chilled me to the bone. My anxiety took hold, and I bit down and chewed at the fullness of my bottom lip; the jolt of pain centered me. A man had died, I had seen it clear as day, and the voice had to have witnessed it too. If any of it was real, I wasn't sure, but the running had been very real.

The Elysian Fields bus traveled slowly through the French quarters, the city's heart drenched in gray and gloom. Still, people braved the weather, and some in horse-drawn buggies. I watched it until everything seemed to blur together before me. Then, it was like being sucked

down a vacuum hose, the air pulled me forward and compressed my lungs tight at the same time as every little insignificant thing played over and over in my head, and the world around me disappeared. The gray sky swallowed in black darkness, and after fighting for however long it takes to pass through the French Market, I've finally sucked in a breath. I gripped my book sack tightly in my arms as if it were the only thing tethering me to this world. The Lexapro in my bag crumpled under the weight, another supply of pills that solved nothing. No one has seen anything; I cannot help but sigh in relief.

After a thirty-minute bus ride, I stumbled off the bus at Selma Street with weak knees. I still had a short walk before I would finally make it home. I crossed the street quickly and walked in the dark. There were busted street lights at the end of my block and two blighted properties next door and across the street. They were all remnants of hurricane Katrina. I was not too fond of their appearance in the day, and the lightning and heavy rain made them appear much eerier. So, I quickened my step to reach the front porch. Over my shoulder, I constantly looked for anything like those creatures, anything that stood out. Digging into my pocket, I dug out keys and a few miscellaneous items like dental floss and a crumbled business card. I shoved everything else back into my pocket, checking a few more times over my shoulder before I opened the front door.

The smell of burning food and smoke greeted me and choked the living room. At the door, I dropped my bag and rushed to the kitchen. Uncle Auggie sat at our small green Formica kitchen table, a glass of ice tea sweated between his worn brown fingers, a box fan whirling in his face, and he was the very picture of smug. A small fire extinguisher lay on the floor between the stove and the green table. Grandma Fran stood scrapping blacken bits of some poor charred piece of unidentifiable food. The room was smoky, and the open window only helped so much.

Finally, I flipped the switch for the ceiling fan and opened the back door. All the while, my uncle waved me away from helping.

"This is her mess," He signed.

"Do I even want to know what that was supposed to be?" I signed back.

"That was seven steaks. The damn pan was on fire. I thought she was going to burn the house down. Can you please tell your grandmother to stay the hell out of my kitchen?" Uncle Auggie signed.

"No." I said out loud and then signed, "Your kitchen, your sister." To which, he waved me away.

"I know you and the old coot are talking about me. I was on the damn phone, and he could have damn well turned the fire off for me. But he's sitting his smug ass over there like he's the only damn person in this house that can cook." Grandma Fran yelled and signed.

Uncle Auggie just sat there. He pulled a hearing aid from his ear and shook it a few times.

"Need a new battery, can't hear a damn thing." He signed. The man was hearing impaired, wore two hearing aids, spoke and signed, but chose to sign more with his sister and me. It was his way of using his disability to his advantage. Uncle Auggie always chose the right moments to hear or speak. The easiest way to live with his sister, in silence.

A laugh escaped me; it was almost hysterical in sound, but the whole chaotic scene was oddly funny. The tension and anxiety that had crawled under my skin like marching ants since the streetcar had uncoiled some. All the muscles in my neck released their pressure, and I clutched my sides as I watched Uncle Auggie snatch the pan from his sister's hands and toss it into the trash and leave her standing with a metal spatula in her hands.

“Auggie, why the hell you do that?”

"Throw the shitten pan away! You owe me a new one. I don't want the cheap shit either."

Uncle Auggie hissed.

"What's so funny?" Grandma Fran questioned.

I watched her mouth quirk into a firm pout. The look was the most significant warning if there ever was one creased into the lines of her mouth, deepening the ones made from smoking Benson and Hedges cigarettes for thirty-plus years. Uncle Auggie hooked his thumb at his sister with a smug smirk, another silent jab. I think he was trying to make light of the situation. However, that look ripped the smile right off my face. I straightened up and fixed my face as she taught me to as a child. And, I had to answer even if I didn't want to. There were no rhetorical questions when considering my grandmother.

"Nothing, ma'am," I said, "I just felt like laughing."

“ What the hell wrong with you, Fran? The girl can laugh if she wants— your sourpuss ass can leave the room. “

“Don’t tell me shit, Auggie,” Grandma Fran angrily huffed.

Uncle Auggie raised his voice, “I TELLS YOU! I SAID LEAVE THAT GIRL ALONE!”

I took my chance and walked out of the kitchen for my room. It was a choice that could lead to several reactions. It all depended on my grandmother's mood. I shook my head; I couldn't even laugh without being scrutinized. My every move deciphered as a mood swing or being crazy. As if adult twins squabbling over burnt food and pans wasn't funny. Finally, I slammed my bedroom door closed. How I wished it would shut out the world or at least keep my grandmother away.

"Frankie, you're cracked, and you'll always be." I mumbled to myself, and I knew my Grandma Fran would never allow me to forget how cracked I was. I saw it in her eyes.

The room wasn't mine, not even with all my drawings hanging on the wall or movie posters. The room never felt like mine. It was my mother's, and it hadn't changed much over the years; it was still yellow, and the curtains were the same cornflower and daisy motif. Everything I owned stood out against the 70s blue floral and yellow wallpaper, but it was like having my mother here. I felt her presence in the room. My mother was here in the small possessions that hung on the walls. Pictures of my mother as a teen remained on the desk. I felt safe but hollowed out among my mother's things because all that survived were scattered photographs and memories. I pulled off my purple raincoat, wotted it into a ball, and threw it near the hamper; my work apron and shoes followed. Next, I emptied my jean pockets and sat the spare change and the dental floss onto the dresser before changing into dry clothes. The card lay on the dresser, crumpled free. Where had I picked it up? I couldn't remember taking it, not at the bakery or the doctor's office. Foreign words shimmered in metallic ink on a nondescript white cardstock when I examined the card. I flipped the card a few times, looking at the print as it shimmered in the yellow light of my room. Then right before my eyes, the words began to shift and bleed off the card. It dripped onto her dresser before disappearing. My heartbeat quickened, and I could hear the blood rushing in my ears.

Was I losing my mind? Could you lose your mind twice? My hand swiped over the dresser a few times to check if there was any moisture left behind. There was none, just smooth polished wood. I stared quizzically at the card. Leviticus's Herbs and Teas, brightly written in bronze ink, appeared. Harmlessly, it glowed in the light of the room, like it hadn't just bled off the card and transformed from foreign symbols to plain old English. What would happen next? I

waited for the card to disappear or explode. Maybe I should take my meds. Had I taken them today? The slot for Thursday morning was empty. I had taken them, but why did I see things? Anxiety clawed at me, shortening my breath and drawing spots at the corners of my vision. The prescription bottle of Klonopin shook, clutched between my trembling hands, and I struggled to swallow the pill dry.

“Please, not another one.” I gasped. I couldn’t breathe, and the vacuum feeling slammed into me fast. I struggled to see past the blackness, to force air through my mouth. I clenched my eyes closed tight and tried to remember what Dr. Warner said to do, count. Out loud, I counted, "One Mississippi... Two Mississippi... Three Mississippi."



The facility was a little over two hours outside of New Orleans. Matthew was already there, having had an earlier shift than me. I don’t know why I thought it was good to travel two hours for work. Some crazy idealistic view on loyalty perhaps drove me there every shift. Maybe, I desired to keep close to the man I loved like another brother. Because I couldn't, and I wouldn't leave him behind, neither could Matthew. So, I rolled all my jeep’s windows down and blasted Marvin Gaye. I sang along to *Grapevine* as the sun rose higher into the sky and flickered through cypress trees. The long strip of highway gave me time to breathe and adjust. I sipped at my coffee and felt the wind blow through my hair, and drummed my fingers against the steering wheel between shifting gears. And I promised myself that I would be ok. I promised myself that I was stronger today than yesterday. And when I exited the highway, and ten minutes later, drove up into the facility's parking lot, I locked the nagging feelings and thoughts behind a professional mask.

"Good morning, Stanley," I greeted the security guard.

"Miss Cassandra, your looking prettier than ever, this morning," greeted Stanley with a wink in his glassy blue eyes.

"You, big flirt, I'm going tell your wife when I get back there."

"She already know. I am allowed to compliment, but y'all already know Patrice is my one and only. I loved that gal all my life." He laughed.

I waved goodbye and headed for the break room.

Breakfast and morning medicines were underway when I reached the breakroom. The breakroom wasn't updated since probably the 80s; its pink and blue triangle checked walls and old blue laminate cabinets and tables were chipped and worn. Nevertheless, the room oddly had more occupants for this time of morning. Patrice sat across the room sipping a coke and talking on the phone with her pregnant daughter, more than likely. There were two people sitting at the table closest to the kitchenette. I gave Patrice a wave. I'd tell her later about her husband Stanley on her smoke break. I then headed to put my lunch away. Matthew was making a pot of coffee and pulling out three cups.

"I hope one of those are for me?"

"Always sis, but we have two visitors this morning for breakfast," he said with a small corner of his mouth lifted as he nudged his head to the right.

A tuff tangled red hair and golden wheat irises greeted me.

"Good morning," I whispered. I was almost scared to speak, and whatever spell that made this happen would break.

"They're here for coffee; the cafeteria's coffee is disgusting. I watch Miss Frankie spit the contents back into the cup."

"Oh really?"

“Yup, She’s a CDM girl, chicory all the way. She was raised right,” Matthew laughed.

I shook my head, and placed my lunch in the fridge and then grabbed the carton of cashew milk and the flavored creamers. Levi sat close to Frankie, his eye inquisitively examining her face and hair like he had found something unique in the spill of brown freckles across her face or the coils of tangled red curls. I’d have to see if she’d let me wash and comb her hair today. She was such a pretty girl.

“Miss Kitty, you’re here early.” Frankie rasped softly.

Nearly four weeks and she finally spoke to me. I laughed, “Yes, my schedule changed back. I’ll be here during the day now.”

Levi turned and faced me; he blinked his eyes and smiled as if seeing me for the first time.

“Cassandra, good morning,” he said in smooth tenor that I remembered cracked before it settled into silk.

“You’re looking well, Levi. New friend?”

“Yes,” he drawled lazily.

My charge smiled at me, and then her attention was drawn away by Matthew and cups of coffee.

“Oh, goody, you got the creamers. Does anyone want cereal or I think we have bagels and cream cheese?” Matthew asked, turning to search the stocked cabinets.

“Cereal, please. Do we have any fruit?”

Frankie pulled a banana from her lap and offered it to me.

“Thanks, I’ll take half and you’ll eat the other?”

She nodded her head. Levi again stared at the wild curls falling into her face like a curious child. They sprang wildly with her movement, and his eyes followed them. I watched as

Levi expressed more emotion starring at Frankie than he had in the last two months. He seemed to move on autopilot, working without existing.

“You all right there, boss-man?” Matthew asked as he slid four halves of bagels smeared in pineapple cream cheese onto the table.

“Matthew, why wouldn’t I be alright?” Levi said in a dull tone before taking a bite. He chewed methodically, side to side.

I tried my hardest not to stare. Instead, I only took quick glimpses of Levi and Frankie as I poured cereal and cashew milk into my bowl. The banana smelled fragrant. I took less than half and pushed it towards Frankie, who smiled and took a bite. They were aware and eating, and I refused to make breakfast awkward between us. I needed to see them progress beyond the fog of medications. Matthew chattered on like this was the norm for them, and I knew it wasn’t, and so did he, but he kept their attention as if this was a regular occurrence. One day, maybe. I shoved in another spoonful and could taste the honey bunches of oats for the first time.



“Four Mississippi... Five Mississippi, I’m in my mother’s room on the floor. Six Mississippi... seven Mississippi, I can smell the lemony scent of Florida water. Eight Mississippi...nine Mississippi, I can hear my grandmother and uncle talking in the kitchen. Ten Mississippi, I am in control.” I declared to myself and breathed in slow and deep.

The prescription bottle lay discarded on the floor along with the card. I pulled myself up onto the edge of the bed, took several more deep breaths with the side of my face pressed into a pillow. Then, finally, I curled up on my left side and closed my eyes; everything ached and felt heavy, and my left hand spasmed unpleasantly. I don’t know how long I lay there, but I could feel how the pillow began to dampen underneath my wet hair.

“Get up, Frankie. You need to get dry before you get sick.” I told myself.

After a panic attack, it was always harder for me to move, too heavy, and too tired from losing control. When the medicine kicked in, it left me limp; it took another five minutes of coaxing myself to move. The thought of taking a shower was too much; I just wanted to sleep if I could. Purple pajamas and one messy, partially damp braid later, I laid across my bed just breathing.

“Knock. Knock,” Uncle Auggie called.

“Once second,” I called and dove across the bed to shove the card and the pills beneath the bed skirt. “Come in!”

Uncle Auggie walked into the room with a tray containing our dinner, tomato soup, and grilled cheese. He pulled two cans of coke from his pocket and gave a toothy grin.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I signed.

We rested against the headboard; frilly decorative pillows tucked behind us. Our soup was conveniently in mugs, and I held my cup to my chest with a triangle piece of sandwich submerged in the creamy tomato soup.

“Your Grandmother was pissed off, but not with you. We should let her stew in it for a bit.” Uncle Auggie signed.

My uncle, ever the peacemaker, would love to brush off my grandmother’s behavior or blanket it under a joke or a comfort meal, but the tension continued to build.

“I don’t think that’s true, Uncle Auggie. This entire day has been a nightmare, and to make it worse, I can’t even laugh around her. She makes everything that I do seem off. I’m tired. I’m tired of her,” I said out loud. And if she so happened to be listening, I wanted her to know how I felt.

He sighed before me; his brown face creased between the brow. I never wanted to cause friction between them, but who else could I talk to about this?

“I’m sorry, Frankie. I don’t know what to do about your grandmother. Sometimes, even I don’t know what’s her problem. I guess that don’t help you very much.”

“No, it don’t.” I shook my head. “And you shouldn’t have to try.”

We sat there for a while, eating in silence, my uncle in deep thought, and I enjoyed the last of my meal, alternating between sips of soup and my cold drink. Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw how my uncle struggled to say something, probably something to soothe me, but I wasn’t very interested in being comforted; hell, if the medication didn’t do it, then his words sure wouldn’t.

“Look, Uncle Auggie, you don’t have to go against my grandma. I know she’s your sister. I guess I’m struggling to understand why everything had to change, but you never did. So, don’t worry about it.” The crease began to ease between his brow, but he still looked uneasy to me. Finally, I watched him clap his hands and brush the crumbs from his hands on the tray.

He made eye contact and said, “She may be my sister, but that don’t make her right.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“So, girl, you gonna tell me why your day was bad? Don’t think I didn’t hear what you said before talking about your grandmother spoiled the mood. You looked a little frazzled earlier. I don’t think it was the smoke in the kitchen either. You’re used to that. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s nothing. I just saw something strange. “You’re going to think that I’m crazy, anyway.” I signed, not wanting the conversation overheard. I didn’t dare look into his eyes.

My uncle shook his head, his worn hands tilted my chin, brushed stray hairs away from my tan freckled face, his aged brown irises ringed in gray stared into mine. He tapped my nose to

draw my attention, a small gesture between us from days when I was a little girl following him around the house. “Never be afraid to show me those whiskey browns. You speak freely with me. I tells you this all the time.” He whispered, then signed, “Nothing you say could ever make me think you’re crazy. You’ve never been crazy. Now your grandmother’s downstairs is a whole different story. She was crazy in the womb.”

I laughed at the wisecrack. Uncle and grandmother were seventy-three years old and had shared the same womb. So if my grandmother was crazy, then so was he by proxy. At that moment, I ached because my twin brother was dead, and I wouldn’t ever have what my uncle and grandmother had. My brother died, and with him, we buried our bond.

I stared at my uncle and finally asked, “Have you ever heard of sin eaters?”

“I don’t think that I have? Is that some kind of music group or something?”

My uncle made a face, mouthing the words a few times as if that would bring some recollection. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to continue. As I mulled over the events of the day, the story seemed too farfetched for anyone to believe. Maybe, I had hallucinated everything I saw. It wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last, considering I had two on the same day, a matter of hours between the two. However, I had seen something, and there was a name for those things. Usually, I only saw my parents and brother, who lurked in mirrors and puddles. Sometimes they were smiling at me, and other times they appeared covered in blood and glass. I had never seen anything like today.

“Don’t tell grandma...I saw something on the streetcar.”

“I won’t. What did you see?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t know what I saw,” I said out loud. “I saw something strange... No, let’s just forget about it. It’s not important.” I signed

“Kiddo, don’t worry. We can talk about it whenever you ready.”

“Yeah...I know, Uncle Auggie.”

Picking at the hangnail on my thumb until it lifted and bled a little at the corner was a nervous habit, and I was worried about my uncle’s reaction to how the whole incident would be perceived. So I watched his facial expressions, determining the tiny twitches or lack thereof if I should continue.

“A man was asleep on the streetcar. He was a big man with flushed red skin, almost like a bad sunburn. Well, he wasn’t sitting alone. There was something next to him, but it wasn’t right. It wasn’t human. There were two of them. I thought I was seeing things. Their eyes looked like the bottom of glass bottles, but they were gold and bulged from their heads. One of them was doing something to the man. I think he was eating him.” I signed quickly.

I continued to dig at the thumbnail before pulling my thumb into my mouth to gnaw at the skin. I couldn’t tell Grandma Fran because nine out of ten, she’d have me on a higher dosage of meds or in front of the priest. I hoped that my uncle would keep this to himself, but there was no guarantee.

“I never heard of anything like this, Frankie. I’m not saying it isn’t possible. I’ve seen some strange shit before. You know, I worked in the shipyards, but let’s keep this between us. Get you some rest.” Uncle Auggie signed. He patted my head, gathered the tray, and left the room.

Alone, I felt absolutely alone. I turned the light off and curled up under the covers. It wasn’t late enough for me to sleep, barely 8:30, but there wasn’t anything for me to do. Nothing that I wanted to do, at least. I could have untangled my hair and made it easier to manage tomorrow, but I didn’t. When the door clicked closed behind my uncle, my energy depleted.

Tears slid down my cheek and welled in my ear. I was tired. Everything had gone wrong since the car accident, and sometimes I wished I hadn't made it. I often wished that they hadn't pried my body from the wreckage. It was a selfish thought, but I couldn't help it. The loss of my family took its toll; coping was nonexistent. I buried everything so deep down until something small like a memory pulled it to the surface, and then I buried again under antidepressants and antipsychotics. It was exhausting, but I wasn't ready to confront it; I was afraid that I would lose everything a second time if I did face it. The pit of her stomach burned and was cramped with anxiety. Tucking my face into my pillow, I prayed for sleep. I prayed that I could forget everything that happened today, but I felt deep inside that I wouldn't forget.

What You Know and What You Dream and Everything in Between

Chapter Two

I don't know anything about what this child was working through or how her smiles had changed into something like a false mask that she hid behind, but I knew they weren't the same. Everything seemed hollowed out from the child I knew. When she was a little girl, she sat on my knee and asked me every question in the world, about the sky, the flowers, how I knew when to pick the vegetables in the backyard, and why okra created slime in a pot. A little shadow, her twin brother, August, listened along to Frankie's chattering as if the questions were not just hers but shared between the two. I missed that little girl, the one I hoped would swim above the grief, but she sank like me, just not in the bottom of a bottle. Maybe, I knew all along that grief was like quicksand, and she was sinking deep, but I could only do what I knew how. So I tried to buffer some of the self-righteous bullshit Fran dished out.

Morning mass was small this morning. I sat in the back pew, alone. The stained glass made a kaleidoscope of colors across the benches, another thing I remembered my grandniece enjoyed. Father Tony's voice became distant to my musing. I had failed so much. I failed this child, failed at seeing what was right before my face, and the misery inflicted on her by Fran and even me, who only buffered my sister's behavior. Because I still wasn't very understanding of what Frankie needed. Mass ended, and I hadn't noticed until he tapped my shoulder.

"Got a lot on your mind, old friend?"

"More than you know, Father Tony," I said as I rubbed my hands down my face. I didn't think I could feel older than I was, but I did.

"Mass is over, and I've known you since I was a boy. So, it's just Tony here or do you need me to be Father Tony?" He asked.

“I could use a friend.”

“Well, that I can do. Come. I’ll change, and then we can talk.”

I followed Father Tony. He directed me to his open office and went to change.

After a while, Tony returned without his robes and shut the door behind him,” That’ll give us a little privacy.” He said, sitting in a chair while I sat on the tiny leather love seat in his office. “ So, what’s on your mind Auggie?”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“The beginning is nice or maybe let’s start with what had you preoccupied in my mass,” Tony said with his eyebrow raised.

“I thought we were talking as friends. You know, the scraggly kid that followed me and his older brother everywhere?”

He laughed, “You got jokes, but really what’s bothering you.”

“My niece Frankie hasn’t been doing well. She’s not with us right now.”

“I heard from Fran that’s she’s in a facility a few hours away.”

“Yeah, did Fran tell you why?” I asked. The woman wasn’t one for telling the whole story; she told bits and pieces that satisfied herself.

“She just told me that Frankie’s sick, but from the look on your face there’s more to it.”

“A lot more to it. Frankie gots what the doctor’s call Bipolar disorder with psychotic features. I don’t even know what half that means.”



I was always told that New Orleans was open to the invisible. The Iwa walked the city among us humans, side by side, and that things preyed on the wicked in the quarters. The Cajuns believed that shifters ran in the woods and hid in swamps. Someone told me that twins who

balanced the city between good and evil played a hopscotch game between the living and the dead. Baron and Maman partied in the graveyard, spiced rum on their tongues and lips; their raucous laughter and giddy trumpet-filled music bounced along the sides of tombstones and frightened those who dared to walk past. As the rain slowed down to a trickle, I saw a sly fox combing the streets in my daydreams. In the street-light, you could see his russet tail swaying and a smiling grin on his maw like he knew something I didn't. Something was brewing, and somehow I knew that this little fox had his paws in it.

The fox no longer combed the streets but sat starring into my darkened room, perched on my windowsill, which was on the second floor furthest away from the fire escape of what used to be an upstairs and downstairs double. Ordinary foxes can't jump or climb this high without some kind of platform, not even a stray cat for that matter, but there it sat, peering at me.

She sleeps. She dreams. She waits just for me. The fox crooned.

"But she doesn't sleep, and she doesn't dream. And she doesn't wait for strange creatures peering through her bedroom window like a creep, " I crooned back at the fox.

How rude; I thought you a sensible girl. Even with your little outburst on the streetcar, I believed you to be so. But, maybe, I was wrong.

"The streetcar?" I inquired."

Yes, don't you recognize my voice?

I rushed to the window and stared into the glowing amber eyes of the fox.

"YOUR THE VOICE!" I hollered.

Yes, now lower your voice unless you want the rest of your family to know that you are speaking to a fox. How do you think they would react to that? He ordered with a condescending attitude.

I shut up quickly. It wasn't a good idea to wake up my grandma; Uncle Auggie slept like a log once his hearing aids were out and only awakened to his internal clock, 5:00 a.m. sharp. I listened to hear any movements down the stairs. After a minute and no sounds of creaking steps, I turned to the fox. I raised my eyebrow at the fox, and my mouth twisted into a frown.

"I don't like you very much."

You don't know me, darling. There's a lot to admire about me. Just let me in, or should I let myself in? The fox smiled as much as a fox could, all sharp teeth, black lips, and pink gums. It was a predatory kind of smile. I kind of felt a little skittish too.

The fox pawed at the window, balanced haphazardly on the ledge by his hind legs; no wards blocked him from entering. The fox tapped his paws against the window. The glass shimmered and rippled under his paws. It rippled until the fox was able to pass entirely through. I jumped back and onto my bed; I reached out for the lamp on my nightstand and willed it like a sword.

"I'll bash your head in if you come any closer."

Oh, really? Girl, I'm a talking fox. I just shimmied through a window. Do you really think that a lamp would stop me from doing whatever I please? The fox said and sat back on his hind legs.

I clutched the lamp to my chest. It was true that the fox could probably do a lot more than I could with a plastic lamp.

"You stay over there." I pointed to where he sat.

That's perfectly fine with me, Frankie.

"How the hell do you know my name?"

Really? Must we go over this again? I am a talking fox.

“O’Fuck I’m really losing my mind.”

Language! The fox corrected sharply. *But if you must. I believe a curse or two is acceptable for this moment in time.*

“You think?”



A stout lady with salt and pepper hair tamed in a braided bun shuffled into the facility before me. She was a fair skin woman with a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose. The woman clutched a bible in her hand, her mouth unsmiling and her brows pinched. I had never seen the woman before today, but I noticed Patrice, who sat next to the receptionist, Summer, and her husband, roll her eyes. It took an excruciating amount of attitude or disrespect for Patrice to blatantly show anything but professional courtesy. I had seen Patrice deal with some of the most destructive and violent patients without any sort of malice, but this woman had managed to make Patrice act out of character.

“Good morning.” I called out.

“Good morning, Cassandra,” they chorused.

Summer was busy talking to the woman when Patrice excused herself from the front desk to walk with me to the break room.

“Do I even want to ask who that woman is?”

“Ask your brother. I had to get away before I acted out of character. The woman is a bible-thumping menace.”

“Oh my God, please tell me that woman isn’t here.”

“Oh, she’s here with her bible in hand,” Patrice said and crossed her arms.

“Shit! I be back. Finish fixing the coffee, sis.” Matthew said and was out the door.

“What the hell is going on, Patrice?”

“That would be Frankie’s grandmother. The woman has caused problems since the girl was checked in. When she comes, Dr. Warner is immediately notified, and Frankie is whisked off to a session with him or Dr. Babin. The man’s trying to keep her from regressing, but the woman is hell-bent on getting her way. Today, Frankie’s uncle isn’t here to control the woman or drag her away. I have a feeling the woman is responsible for some of what’s wrong with the girl, but we won’t know if she regresses.”

I stood at the counter and listened as she explained the woman and the protocol for Frankie.

“What do you think will happen, if she’s refused visitation?” I asked as I poured coffee grinds into the coffee pot.

Matthew walked in and pulled the bag of coffee grinds out of my hand.

“I forgot you couldn’t make coffee to save your life. Move out the way for you kill us with the tar your trying to make. Got damn witch brew!” He said, emptying the coffee filter. “You know that’s nearly a cup of grinds. Tablespoons. All you need is a few tablespoons.”

“What’s going on with Frankie? Is she ok?” I asked, not worrying about his coffee rantings. He should’ve known by now that I couldn’t make it, but I drank several cups to survive.

“I barely made it, but I got her to Dr. Babin’s office and notified Dr. Warner as he finished up his session with Charlie. The woman looked like she was ready to curse up a storm. But, instead, she clutched that bible like it was the only thing holding her back and started yelling about her rights. I heard Dr. Warner say that he would bar all visitations if she continued to disturb the peace of the facility and its patients. The girl’s an adult even though, I think there’s

some kind of guardianship thing, but Frankie was committed by her psychiatrist. I think he's trying hard not to bring the law into this for the sake of the uncle, but she's pushing it."

"You think he'll really report the grandmother to social services?"

"She keeps that attitude or Frankie declines; I would say yes. Dr. Warner will never let the welfare of his patient be hindered."

"Well, isn't this just a beautiful Wednesday morning..."

"Ha! Girl, I'm ready for this day to be over with. The woman is a menace and I bet you lunch that she's upset a patient or two," Patrice huffed.

"Hell, no! Ain't no body crazy enough to take that bet, plus Summer's granddaddy selling gumbo and grilled cheese today. I ain't sharing shit. You better have yawls money." Matthew said and gave Patrice and me the stink eye.

Patrice snorted her cup of coffee, "Your crazy Matt."

"Hmm, I paid for mine in advance. How you like that?"

"I'm just letting y'all know."

I slurped down the last of my coffee and left the break room to start my rounds.



"I know. Colette and Thomas talked to me some time ago before their deaths. They wanted advice on how to proceed. You know I've volunteered in mental hospitals. I've seen many things, and while I've had to acknowledge that I've lacked some understanding of how the mind works, I know that God placed me there to learn and be open to what I experienced. As a priest, I was taught that our service is to people, to bring charity to those in need. Mental illness isn't simple. I know Fran has her own ideas and I've tried to get her to see otherwise, but she's stubborn." Tony said, then sighed.

“Don’t I know it. She’s been right pain in my—”

“Auggie, we are still in the church.” Tony reprimanded.

“Sorry. Tony, she’s driving me up walls. It’s a bitterness that she has and it’s so spiteful. I honestly don’t know why she’s turned it on Frankie. She’s unbearable. I had to drag her out of the hospital. She made a nurse so frazzled that the security guard had to step in. All that self-righteous indignation she spewed as I dragged her out made me so sick. I can’t even talk with the doctor or see Frankie with her there.”

“I didn’t know it was so bad, Auggie. Colette and James told me that they wouldn’t mention Frankie’s condition. Colette felt that her mother wasn’t fit to know after she experienced something negative after ...” Tony paused.

“When Colette miscarried.” I said for him.

“Yes, she was insensitive to Colette’s grief and the depression that followed. Thomas told me.”

“My poor Colette. If she knew how much I failed her child, she would never forgive me.”

I felt the tears burn my eyes. Tony said nothing. He handed over a few tissues and squeezed my shoulder as they finally fell. I never wanted to feel sorry for myself. I wasn’t here for me.

“I don’t think that she would blame you. You’ve always done your best. I know that type of person you are. You’ve never wavered in your love or loyalty. Fran has always been a force to reckon with. I know Colette struggled against her control. She stuck in her ways.”

“I don’t care about Fran right now. I’m struggling to reach my grandniece and I need to know what to do. I can’t believe what Fran says. I know she’s ain’t right. Hell, I know what grief is and how it chocked and drowned me until I hit the bottle.”

“Let me start by saying that the lord never makes mistakes. This isn’t a possession either. I know possessions are possible, but Frankie has faith in her that is strong. Her mind just doesn’t work like ours. She doesn’t process emotions like us. It’s imbalanced. Her mind runs through emotions without her control. The psychotic features means that she can hear, see, and even feel things that may not be there.”

“What does that all mean? She ain’t Frankie no more?” I asked.

“No, she’s Frankie. Let’s think of it like a faucet. Our emotions turn on and off depending on our circumstances. Well Frankie’s faucet runs continuously and uncontrollably. She can’t turn it off and she can’t control the flow. So, she may cycle through sadness, anger, and a false happiness. Does that make a little since?”

“So, there’s nothing we can do?”

“Not exactly. The illness doesn’t have a cure, but it can be managed. She will need a lot of support and stability. I guess she’s been struggling to find that with Fran’s behavior.”

“And, I’ve made things harder. Because I haven’t done enough.”

“But, now you know what to do. You need to give her the support she needs and I think that you should visit Frankie’s doctor and have he or she explain her condition to you. He won’t tell you what’s she says in sessions, but he’ll tell you how’s she faring.”

“Thank you, Tony.” I said and stood to leave. “I think I need to clear my head for a while, but thank you for talking with me.”

“Auggie, my friend, this door is always open to you and in any compacity, priest or friend. Now go clear your head and maybe get something to eat.”

“ I will, thank you. “



The fox walked around, sniffing and pawing through anything of interest on the floor. My clothing lay in a heap, drawing the fox to the crumpled wet clothes, which he stuck his muzzle in and sniffed.

Your clothes smell of rain, human, and the dead. What’s that lingering sweet smell? It smells familiar.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay over there?”

You did, but does that doesn’t matter. What’s that smell, Frankie?

“I work in a bakery.”

Mm, that’s cake and yeasty sweet bread.

“Yes, I made cupcakes, cinnamon rolls, and cardamom buns. You can smell all that? And what do you mean I smell like the dead?”

Frankie, dear, I am a fox. My sense of smell is decisively stronger in this form. Hmm, and you smell like grave soil and grief. That’s what death smells like on you. You don’t have the decaying smell because you aren’t the one dead, He said and continued to sniff around my room.

The fox seemed to be controlled by his baser needs and sniffed every corner of my room.

You work at that small bakery off St. Charles. They have the most delectable braided pastries with crushed pistachio.

“You’ve been rustling around our trash?” I asked, staring down at the fox from my perch on the headboard.

The fox gave me a pointed stare, then said, *I am a creature of magic, Frankie. My body holds no limitations. I appeared very human when I bought that treat. Just what exactly are those things called. I might have to get one sometime soon.*

“It’s a cardamom bun. It’s Swedish.”

They’re delicious.

“Ok, sure, they’re delicious, but don’t you think that we are moving further and further away from what matters— Like why the hell are you here?”

I’m here about the card. I gave it to you. Have you read it? I’ve come to invite you for tea, formally. Otherwise, you may never understand my intent. You’ve proven you’re a little slow to the uptake. I’ve told you several times what I am, and you’ve yet to comprehend or connect point a to point b. So, my dear, I want to see you at that address tomorrow at noon.

“Like hell, I will!”

Indeed, you will, he said before a blinding light flashed through my room, and the fox shifted into an owl on the last shard of blinding white light.

Be a good girl, Frankie, and do as I instructed. His voice echoed in my head. The owl flew through the window so fast that I would have believed the whole thing, my imagination playing tricks on me until I saw a tawny feather float down to the carpet.

“Shit, this was real. No, it can’t be. It’s just a dream.” I whispered.



The kitchen felt different without Frankie here. I had no one I wanted to cook for and had been eating out instead. I hadn’t even put effort into groceries. Bitterly, I left Fran to fend for herself. My petty act of punishment. Not that it seemed to bother her. I watched her make toast

or sandwiches, but she never asked, nor did I offer to fix a meal. I wouldn't have anyways, too pissed to cook anything, and I wasn't about to waste good food to my sour mood.

Fran came thundering through the door, her keys clattered against the coffee table, and the door slammed. I don't know what the hell was bothering her, and I didn't care to find out. So, I removed myself from the kitchen and headed for my room. Whatever it was, she could solve it herself. My pocket vibrated, and a string of text messages came one after the other. The first message I read was from Dr. Warner. It read,

“Hello, Mr. Moon. You advised me to text you if there were any issues. So, I am informing you of an incident that transpired today. Your sister, Ms. Moon, visited the facility and caused an uproar. I have been closely monitoring my patient's behaviors before and after visitation day. I have noticed that Frankie regresses after every encounter with her grandmother. I know that she has guardianship over Frankie; however, your sister's behavior has been disruptive, disturbing the safe environment of other patients and antagonizing the staff. As a result, I have threatened to bar her from visitation, which I have decided to enforce, for now. If this continues, I will seek other means for the welfare of my patient. I would appreciate it if we could speak in person soon. I am available Thursday or Friday.”

I clicked onto the following notification, and Fran left several messages that I had ignored earlier, and they were filled with rantings about the doctor and how he wouldn't let her see Frankie. Finally, I stormed out of my bedroom and into Fran's room. I was so mad; I could feel the heat creeping up my neck.

“EXACTLY, WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE?” I hollered. She startled and closed her housecoat over herself as she was in the process of undressing when I barged in.

“I don't know what your talkin about,” She said and looked through her purse.

I yanked the purse from the bed. “You know what I’m talking about, and the doctor contacted me. You were disruptive in the facility. I know you, Fran. And, I know this man ain’t lying. You went and acted a damn plum fool. Well, guess what? You done fucked up and got yourself barred from visitation.”

“He can’t do that!”

“Like hell, he can’t, and I ain’t saying a word to contest that decision. You park your ass here in New Orleans. I’m going to talk to the doctor tomorrow, and I swear before God that if you step out of order, I will help this man do whatever he has in mind to keep you out. You can take that check to the bank.”

A Card Burns a Hole in My Pocket and Burned Bridges

Chapter 3

I awoke earlier than usual, warmed by the sun, and the rumbling of my stomach. My body stretched out among the rumpled comforter and sheets. I reached and stretched high, pulled free the tightness of aching muscles, and then sat up to embrace the day. Shockingly, I felt calmer, no nightmares, just a weird dream. My dream was about a stupid, annoying, uppity fox inviting himself into my room like he owned the place. The creepy little twerp even sniffed my clothes, just plain rude, but the snark that the fox exuded reminded me of my brother August, who had been a downright pain in my ass. I missed him and my parents.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear my thoughts. It wasn't like I didn't want to remember them, but memories, big or small, made my moods spiral out. The sun glinted off the dresser and drew my attention to all the snapshots and photographs of my family. A lot of them had come from August's camera and a USB. Loads of pictures of our family and everything my brother collected for his college entrance portfolio. I taped them to the mirror and on the wall above my bed. I mixed his photography with my sketches and paintings in a cluttered collage of realism and my chaotic works of dreams and folklore. My grandma thought it looked unsightly against the floral wallpaper. I didn't care. I kept it purposely.

After a few more minutes of musing, I collected myself, pulled back the sheets, and climbed out of bed. I dismissed the dream; it was time to get ready for work. I grabbed clothes for the day, a worn and hole-filled tee shirt and paint-splattered jeans; I'd change into my uniform at work. I walked barefoot towards my closet for shoes, pausing when my foot stepped on something. My eyes widened as I lifted my foot and saw the tawny feather below.

"Nope. Nope. Nope." I mumbled. "That's not real."

The clothes dropped out of my hands, and I turned quickly to look out the window. A tuft of fur and another feather lay on the brick ledge outside the window. Backing away slowly from the window, I stumbled into the edge of my bed. I was scared; this couldn't be real. All of this was a dream. I just needed to leave the room, and everything would go back to normal. I scooped up my clothes and left for the bathroom.

The bathroom was as dated as my room. It was a combination of pink and black tiles, dingy white walls, and black and white checkered tile floors. I was amazed as a child to see the pink sink, toilet, and tub, but it now resembled a Pepto Bismol explosion. The water took a while to heat up, so I turned the shower on first. Then, I brushed and pulled my hair into a high bun in front of the mirror. Quickly, I went through my routine of brushing my teeth and washing my face, then hopped in the shower.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing in the kitchen making a pot of chicory coffee. Uncle Auggie entered the kitchen a few minutes later and pulled out ingredients to make breakfast.

“Good morning kiddo, you feel like shrimp and grits?” Uncle Auggie said with a smile instead of signing. His hands filled with ingredients from the fridge.

“Morning, I'm up for whatever you want to cook. Just do your magic.” I said from my seat at the green table. “Need help?”

He gave me a slight nod. Then, in comfortable silence, we moved around each other; I pulled out a cutting board and knife to help with the prep work. My uncle methodically peeled and deveined shrimp quickly over a strainer in the kitchen sink. He was patient with me and tried his best to adapt to the limited motion in my right hand. Uncle Auggie nudged my shoulder with his elbow, pointed to the seasoning I was chopping, and signed for a smaller dice. I ran the blade

over the holy trinity until the vegetables were finely diced. We stood before the stove and were tending to a pot of grits and sauteed shrimp when Grandma Fran's voice broke our momentum.

"Frankie, go get your medicine. I want to see you take it." Grandma Fran called out from her bedroom.

"Good morning to you too, Fran. Fell off your broom last night?" Uncle Auggie snapped. The smile ripped from his face.

"August, don't start with me."

"I do believe you started it, woman."

I left the kitchen to retrieve my pill case and everything I needed for work and avoided looking at the floor and window. When I returned to the kitchen, Grandma Fran was drinking coffee at the table. I sat my pill case on the table, and Grandma Fran snatched it up to examine the contents. My grandma pulled the two pills from the Friday slot and handed them to me. With a sip of coffee, I swallowed the Seroquel and Lexapro. Uncle Auggie slammed a plate in front of his sister.

"Here, warden, your breakfast."

Uncle Auggie sat a plate before himself and me. I itched to leave the tense room. They were getting ready to argue about me, and I would rather not be a part of it or hear it. The meal would have been something I savored if given a chance. Instead, I stuffed my mouth with spoonful after spoonful of creamy grits and sautéed shrimp, rushing through the meal. I washed it down quickly with the last drags of coffee in my cup. I was getting ready to place my dishes in the kitchen sink when my uncle stopped me.

"Leave it, kiddo. Go on, get to work." He said out loud. I had barely left the kitchen before I heard Uncle Auggie snap.

“You are starting to piss me off. You need to leave that girl alone.”

The front door closed at the beginning of Uncle Auggie’s rant. I left the house, grateful that I wouldn’t have to hear more, and walked quickly to the bus stop. The sky was overcast, and it was hot and humid. I hated the month of August. It was one of the hottest months in New Orleans. All the rain they had this week had made it even more sticky, for sure. The cotton shirt was beginning to stick to her back with sweat. The bus was pretty empty when I got on. I paid for an all-day pass and sat in the middle section of the bus. It moved quickly up Elysian Fields picking up and letting off people at different stops. This morning, I decided to walk through the quarters. I had two hours before I needed to be at work. So, when the bus turned at the French Market, I got off.

It was still early morning, and the vendors set up their goods. A vendor sold African clothing, bright prints hanging on metal racks. There were tables piled with sunglasses, leather purses, bags, and jewelry covered many tables. There was a tall older blonde man stacking books on a table. I peeked at a few books and pulled a few romances out of a pile.

“Good morning. How much for these?”

“Hello, those are three for six-fifty,” the blonde man said.

“I’ll take them.”

I handed over the money then shoved the books into my book sack. I left the vendor behind and headed into the food stall area. At a juice bar in the market, I stopped for a fresh green drink and then the praline stall for a treat for Uncle Auggie. Then made my way across the street and out of the market to browse the shops. I walked by Jackson Square, and it was beautiful, regardless of the overcast. The horse-drawn buggies were all lined up in front of the square. However, the smell of horse dung forced me to pick up my pace up North Peters, where I

finally reached Canal. People were moving swiftly on Canal Street. Streetcars and buses zipped up and down the street. Briskly, I walked down to Carondelet to wait for the St. Charles Street Car. Surprisingly, I felt at ease walking around the city after yesterday's events. Maybe, the meds were kicking in, but I felt almost normal like I was a tourist sightseeing.

The streetcar screeched to a stop before the crowd of people in front of the streetcar stop. I waited patiently for my turn as passengers boarded and paid their fare. The driver examined my pass before signaling me to take a seat so that others could deposit cash into the machine. On the long bench behind the driver, I took a seat. After everyone boarded, the St. Charles streetcar turned onto Canal and turned again onto the next side street. It slowly lagged up the track, allowing tourists to view all the architecture. I would be impatient about the speed any other time, but the thirty-minute ride was ok today. At St. Charles and Prytania, I got off the streetcar and crossed the street to enter the tiny bakery on the corner.

“Good morning,” I called out to staff and customers.

Then I ducked into the staff room to put my things away, slipped on my uniform, apron, and hairnet, and then walked into the bathroom to wash my face and hands. The kitchen was busy; several workbenches held dough and trays filled with pastries ready for the oven. Finally, I clocked in and headed for my station.

“Morning, Frankie! You got six birthday cakes to frost this morning. Help me with the orders of cupcakes when you're done. I'm going to knock out two more trays of croissants for proofing, first,” Miriam bellowed out cheerfully.

“Gotcha!”

One by one, I pulled square cakes from the fridge, decorating them in soft pastel pinks, yellows, and greens, piping scallop edge borders, and pink and yellow rosettes. A specialty order

unicorn cake required nonpareils, a two-toned mane, and a golden luster dust horn. I worked swiftly, piping then boxing the cakes for pick up. Decorating the cakes took less than two hours, and then I pulled out the cupcakes while Miriam cleaned the workspace.

“You’re doing well this morning, Frankie. Did you get more sleep last night?” Miriam asked. Her smile stretched across her plump brown face.

“Better than usual, and I was awake before the sun,” I smiled. “I don’t feel all that tired either.

“That’s good to hear. How’s your uncle and your grandmother doing?” Miriam asked on the sly.

“Miriam, why don’t you drop by and see Uncle Auggie. You already know he likes to see you.” I said and smirked. “Grandma Fran’s the same old same old.”

“Ugh, so she’s in warden mode.”

“She just... drives me nuts. Everything I do, she scrutinizes. I don’t know if I’m coming or going sometimes, but then she’s there to watch me take pills, or she’s taking me to see the priest. She makes me more tired.”

“It might not seem like it, but she wants to help you.”

“Well, I don’t need that much help. I just wish things would go back to normal.”

“It’ll get better. You have to make the most of what you got right now. You know I’m here for you.”

“I know, I’m just tired, and I missed them.”

“I know, honey... But come on, let’s not spoil your mood. I know just what to do.”

Miriam bellowed as she turned the Maze CD on the boombox.

We decorated two hundred and fifty bridal cupcakes with buttercream and gum paste flowers for the next two hours, talked, and sang. Finally, around twelve, I took a fifteen-minute break, where I sat outside the shop on the curve with a bottle of water. It was shady but sticky hot. Sipping the water slowly, I stared at the cars driving past on St. Charles street. I pulled my cellphone from my pocket to check the time, and the card fell out.

“What the hell?”

It was the card from under my bed, and in my head, I heard the voice say, “Noon.”

“Not today, Satan,” I said before I pushed the phone and card back into my pocket. “I’m not going crazy today.”



Matthew and I were in the art therapy room when Dr. Warner and an older gentleman walked in. The room was once a tiny luncheon room, but now it was a make-shift art room filled with hand-me-down art equipment donated by a local community college. The man was above average height, slender, and an inch or two taller than Dr. Warner, smartly dressed in a button-up shirt and navy slacks. Even with age creasing his mouth and eyes, I could see that he had been handsome in his youth and carried it still with his strong jawline, straight bridge nose, and warm smiling eyes. So many emotions played on the man’s face as he listened to Dr. Warner and stared at Frankie. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, too far to listen in on the low rumble of Dr. Warner’s voice. I turned towards Matthew, who mouthed uncle, and pointed to Frankie. So, this was the uncle. They walked towards me, and I painted a hopefully friendly smile on my face.

“Hello, Cassandra; I want you to meet Mr. Moon.” We shook hands while Dr. Warner continued to introduce us. “Cassandra and Matthew have been overseeing Frankie’s care.”

“Thank you, I appreciate all that y’all are doing for my grandniece.”

“Your welcome, Mr. Moon. Frankie’s a sweet girl.” I said, and we turned to look at Frankie.

Frankie painted away at a canvas with paint markers, unaware of our presence. The canvas was a wash of gray and blue, watered down and smeared, while faces in shades of contrasting colors covered the background. They weren’t happy images; the faces seemed sad or blank. One particular face was crooked like a broken neck and shards of something poking out the neck and head. It was gruesome but beautiful, and I saw the talent in the deliberate strokes and usage of color.

“She’s very talented,” I said to Mr. Moon.

“Yeah, Frankie loves to paint. When her twin was alive, he loved photography, I have a lot of their work framed around the house.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said—the bit of information adding to the list of reasons for some of Frankie’s behavior.

Matthew was sitting at the table with Levi and Charlie. Charlie was busy pasting on strips of colorful paper cut-outs to a foam ball. My brother watched as Dr. Warner and Mr. Moon approached Frankie from his seat. I think my brother was waiting to see how Frankie would react.

“Frankie, someone is here to visit you.” Dr. Warner spoke softly as not to startle her. Frankie was very skittish and flinched at any loud noises. “It’s your uncle. Would you like to visit with him?”

The girl turned around quickly, her hands moving fast as she signed. I didn’t know the girl could sign, but she signed at a rapid speed. Matthew was fluent in American sign language, and he

watched as the two of them communicated. Frankie didn't sign long before she spoke aloud like this was something she regularly did, a mix of sign language and speech.

"Uncle Auggie, you know the Baron? Have you met Maman too?"

The man looked puzzled. I recognized the names but didn't know who the girl was referring to, and it sure didn't seem like Mr. Moon knew either. Dr. Warner stepped in then.

"That's the names she's given Dr. Babin and me. She refers to most of us by a different name. Cassandra and Matthew or kitties, I believe."

Frankie seemed uncaring of what Dr. Warner was saying. She started to rub her hands together and rubbed the paint from the palms until it flaked off into small crumbs. It wasn't important to her, and once again, she was only semi-conscious.

"Frankie, hey, you want to sit and talk with me."

The man's face fell when Frankie shook her head.

"She comes and goes, sir. Please, don't take it personally. She may be more responsive the next visit. Just give her some time." I said, hoping my words would help, but the man looked crushed.

Dr. Warner agreed then he ushered the man to the exit. Frankie went back to painting, smearing red handprints across her canvas and dragging them down over the faces. The image became muddy like a switch in her mood. It appeared like she was more angry than sad, and her hand slapped against the canvas until the easel buckled and fell.



Dr. Warner took me to see Frankie. She was doing what she loved, painting, and for a second, I thought it was my Frankie. Frankie whirled around and signed like she had been waiting to see me. When she spoke, asking me a question I couldn't answer, the lights turned

out, and that was no longer the Frankie I knew but a stranger. It was so fast too, and I couldn't bring my mind around what I had just witnessed. Then the doctor led me out of the room to his office.

“She doesn't mean to hurt you. It's something she can't control right now. It's as if she's locked herself away, and maybe for a few minutes or an hour, she's consciously herself. I'm not ready to diagnose her with another condition. I'm not sure if this is just her trying to cope or not. We haven't spoken beyond the delusions. That's why I wanted to talk with you, Mr. Moon.”

“Sir, forgive me, but I don't understand everything. I'm trying really hard to piece things together, but I'm falling short. That girl wasn't the Frankie I knew.”

“It's still Frankie. It may not seem like it, but it's her. She's shut down. Her mind is trying to cope with her pain. If I had to say it, I believe Frankie has been putting up a front for a long time, and she didn't give you any signs of her deteriorating state until she resulted to an extreme. Even I believed she was doing well.” Dr. Warner assured me.

“I went to my friend and he advised me to speak with you on her condition... said you would be better at explaining. He kind of compared her condition to a broken faucet.”

“I guess in a way that's true. We don't exactly know what causes bipolar disorder. It's not something that we can do a blood test for or a brain scan. We understand the symptoms, but they vary. Genetic, biological, and environmental factors can cause bipolar disorder—genetically linked to someone in the family on either side, maternal or paternal. A toxic environment can cause this disorder as well. Most people aren't aware of mental illness or what it looks like, but bipolar disorder can be described as a faucet or a gear shift in a car. It is a shift between emotions; sometimes it's a fast change, and other times it lingers for weeks or even months when it involves depression. It all depends.”

“So, what is this? What is Frankie feeling now?”

“I think that Frankie is trying to cope. However, I believe she hasn’t come to terms with issues like her grief, and Frankie is comfortable walled away in a delusion because it may be easier than facing those issues. Everyone copes differently.”

“Is there anything that I can do?”

“I would appreciate it if you would keep your sister away for some time. I understand that Ms. Moon is her grandmother, but I am looking out for the well-being of my patients.” He said, then sighed as if recalling something that made him exhausted. “It’s not just Frankie who reacts negatively to her, and I honestly would like this environment to be as controlled as my patients need it. However, I will not bar you from visitation. Although the clarity was short-lived, Frankie reacted to you positively. I think it is best that you continue to visit and share things or bring approved items for Frankie. We would like to see if she reacts to other stimuli.”

“Am I allowed to cook? We’ve been cooking together since Frankie was young.”

“As long as you don’t supply her with anything that may be considered a dangerous object like metal utensils, I believe you’ll be fine.”

“I still don’t understand everything, but I want my grandniece to get the help she needs.”

“Mr. Moon, you’ve taken a step in the right direction. I don’t think anyone expects you to know everything about this condition, but your willingness to help support Frankie is the best start. That’s really all we can ask for. I will give you a few pamphlets on bipolar disorder. I think I may have some to explain delusions and hallucinations. If there is anything that you need to help with understanding, I will do my best to help. We all just want Frankie to have support and a bit of stability while she’s here.” Dr. Warner said, then stood to find the information for me.

I don't think I understood everything, which was ok for now, but I felt a little lighter, and I was already planning to make things that Frankie loved. Maybe, I would start simple with treats from the bakery and perhaps a few muffulettas, and hopefully, she remembered the good times we had on the Riverwalk. I didn't know, but I felt renewed because there was something that I could do. I was able to help and not stand around wondering.

What You Will and What You Won't Do

Chapter 4

The drive back to New Orleans always felt shorter. Matthew dozed with his head rested on the car door, his locks slapped wildly, but he didn't stir, the seat belt behind his back. No matter how much I argued with him about it, he never allowed the strap under his neck, said it crushed his throat, choked him. The wind whipped through my FRO, blowing the tight coils off of my face and cooling me down from the summer heat. I sped down the highway with Sade crooning low in the background. It was an exhausting day, with several meltdowns from Charlie, and a heart-wrench ache filled my chest when Frankie curled under the covers and cried for hours unresponsive to Matthew and me. Levi hovered around these patients, calmly speaking with them, and his whispered tenor drew memory after memory of times I wished I could relive. Matthew was somber most of the day, I think Charlie had worn him out, or maybe he ached with the desire to solve the world's problems and falling short broke what little resolve he had. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my brother's soft heart in bubble wrap and cushion him from what bothered him the most. Charlie, sweet Charlie that suffered so from schizophrenia and autism, making touch uncomfortable and other stimuli crack through the calm of medication. Charlie's meltdown left him bloody and bruised from self-inflicted wounds. Wrapped in a blanket, Matthew rocked Charlie on the floor for two hours, filled with screams and tears. I watched the progress dissolve. I wept in silence as I drove. My tears became mist as the wind brushed them away. I felt crippled by what I lacked, how I lacked control over their conditions. I wished day and night that I could do more, and I had to harden myself to make it through. Shed my tears in private so that I could be stronger for them.

“Why do you always cry alone? I’m your brother, your twin, and just like you’re there for me, I want to be there for you.” Matthew said and reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

“Ha,” I laughed and wiped my eyes on my uniform shirt quickly. “I’m not cry.”

“Sure, you’re not crying and the mosquitos left Louisiana for a vacation up north.” He said and slapped a hand over his neck. “You need to roll up these windows. Thank God the tops not down. I might die of blood loss.”

I rolled the windows up and hit the A.C. I tried to change the subject by turning the music up, but Matthew had none of that. Instead, he turned the dial down and shifted his body. The door was against his back, and his gaze settled on the side of my face.

“I might be blinder than a bat with or without these contacts, but I know when my sister’s crying. You better believe I know when you cry in the tub— when you think that I’m asleep. Well, let me tell ya, I know. I feel it.”

“You know Frankie was a twin?”

“Yeah, but don’t try to change the subject. Oh and her uncle and grandmother are twins as well, but that’s besides the point. Why are you closing me out?”

“I don’t mean to.”

“But you are and you have been for a while. Why?”

“I guess I’m struggling to stay strong for you and our patients and myself. I just don’t know what to do sometimes and I think I just want to shield you.”

“From what, exactly? I’m a big boy now, I’m not the albino kid in elementary that was picked own and needed your help. I grew up a lot since then. I can fight for myself.”

“Yeah, I just want you to be happy and today you look broken.”

“I had a patient fall to pieces and I held him and there was nothing I could do. I’m human, Cassandra. I hurt with them and for them. I hurt when I think of you crying alone. I want just as much as you to be strong for them, but I understand that I can’t always be.”

Matthew did very little after that, giving me time to digest what was said, but something deep inside wouldn’t allow me to. Something deep inside wanted to keep whatever control it had because I was a rock, and I wasn’t malleable.



Every day, for nearly a week, the card reappeared in every pocket of every pair of pants I owned. I had torn the card apart, threw it in the trash at work and home, but the card always reappeared, crisp and new. It was driving me insane. The card was like a memento of my crazy experience on the streetcar, and it wouldn’t let me forget. At some point, I stopped using my pockets. Instead, I carried everything in my hand or book sack. It was Thursday. I worked until one on Thursdays and then walked the few blocks to Louisiana Avenue and down to Chestnut Street to the clinic. The office was empty when I arrived. I checked in with one of the receptionists, Ms. Brenda, who informed me that Dr. Warner was in with a patient and would be out in ten minutes. A Bon Appetit magazine was the most appealing magazine on the table. All the others were health-related. I skimmed the recipes and found several that I wanted to try. So, I slipped the magazine into my book sack. No one would notice or care.

Dr. Gary Warner walked into the waiting room. In his early thirties, the man was of average height and well-kempt. I thought him prissy prim and proper until one day I saw a tattoo peeked out from under a sleeve. Bands of green covered his brown skin. I remembered him telling me that he was a young dumb kid living in the lower nine (lower 9th ward) trying to fit in, and now he was a black professional, and they marked him as a thug. I had scrunched my face at

the thug remark. Labels, everyone wanted to label someone negatively. The word thug imprinted on his arms and a billboard sign blinked the word crazy in neon light on my forehead.

“Hey, Frankie, you ready?” Dr. Warner asked. He had my file tucked under his arm.

“Yeah.”

I grabbed my stuff and followed him down the hall to his office. The clinic was old and drab, created for some other function before the mental health clinic existed. Dr. Warner and a rotation of doctors shared the same office on various days. It had little personality, and it was more like a closet with the tiniest couch in burgundy paisley, ugly. Dr. Warner sat at the cheap desk that had peeled up laminate and exposed cork.

“How have you been this week? Are you getting any sleep?”

I folded my hands onto my lap and replied, “More than I expected. I didn’t have any nightmares this week either.”

“That’s excellent progress! So, you’ve remembered to take your medicine every day.”

“I’m doing my best. My Grandma Fran makes me take the morning dosage in front of her.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“How would you feel? I’m nineteen, and my grandmother has legal guardianship over me because I was mentally incapacitated at seventeen. No one tells you failed suicides come with a price. It’s not like I’m not paying for surviving,” I said, then paused to catch my breath. “My family’s dead, and I stupidly wanted to follow them. Oh, and I hallucinated my parents handing me the pills. So, I guess that means I am pretty fucking unhappy or fucked up?”

I glared at my hands, refusing to look at Dr. Warner. The words had spilled from my mouth too freely, and at the same time, it wasn't enough because they were barely touching the surface.

"No, it makes you human," Dr. Warner said.

"It doesn't feel like it... I'm tired of being fucked up. I'm tired of being around people and feeling alone. I'm tired of the looks my grandma gives me. I'm tired of a whole lot of shit, and I ain't got any other choice but to live with it. They forced me to live. Do you know how it feels to be forced to live? It would have been easier if I had died too."

"Frankie, who can tell you that death is easier? You die once and can't change anything, but you live each day with a new opportunity to change and grow. Death doesn't give you that. Now, I need to know, have you been having suicidal thoughts?"

"No, I couldn't do that if I wanted to," I said. "I haven't tried anything."

Tears streaked down my face unchecked. Dr. Warner pulled a few tissues from the box and handed them to me. I felt raw and exposed after saying this, and it was the first time I had admitted to him that I was bone-tired of everything. Being unhappy was the least of my problems; it was the scrutiny and the new label's weight. Crazy weighed heavily on anyone's shoulders. Nothing in the last two years had gone right. Sometimes, I felt like my grandmother would be happier with a drone than me.

"Frankie, if there is ever a time that you feel suicidal, you need to contact me. I'll write my cell phone down for you. I need you to know that you can contact me day or night. It doesn't matter when."

"Ok, but I haven't thought about killing myself, really."

"I believe you, Frankie," Dr. Warner sincerely said.

The sincerity in Dr. Warner's voice nearly knocked me over. It was unexpected, and I hadn't had anyone say or mean it in a very long time. Dr. Warner hadn't scrutinized my words. Maybe, today, he had earned a little more respect and trust. It wasn't a lot, but I felt the tiniest bit more secure in myself and how he would react to my question.

"Dr. Warner, can you hallucinate on the medication?"

"No medication is perfect," Dr. Warner calmly said. "So, it is possible to hallucinate while on medication, and that may mean that we need to increase the dosage or find another medication that is more suitable to the patient's needs. Everything is trial and error because people react differently to medication. Are you still having hallucinations?"

"I think I had one last Thursday after our session."

"Do you remember anything about the hallucination or what may have triggered it?"

"I was on my way home on the streetcar. I felt normal. I guess I was a little tired but ok. So, I don't know what triggered it. I just saw something strange in the back of the car."

"What was strange in the streetcar, Frankie?"

"That's the thing; I don't know what I saw. It looked like men at first, but then they kind of morphed. They had eyes like glass bottles, and they bulged out of their heads. You probably think I'm going crazier."

"No, I don't think that you're crazy at all. You've had a lot of things happen to you in the last few years. You've had trouble coping, and your brain is trying to handle all the stress. Bipolar disorder symptoms can manifest because of stress."

"Yeah, but that's not how people see me. I was just another crazy on the streetcar, and my grandmother is this close..." I held her finger and thumb tightly together. "to having me exercised by the priest."

A startled bark of laughter left Dr. Warner, and I gave the man a skeptical look. He thought I was joking, but I wasn't, and my grandmother wasn't either. Dr. Warner seemed to sober at my impassive face.

"I don't think the catholic church does that anymore."

"Dr. Warner, my Grandma Fran would find away."

"Let's hope that she doesn't. Our session has ended. I want you to record how you feel every day if you can. Record when you feel anxious or when you can't sleep. You can record if you see anything that isn't there. I want us to work together to help you move forward."

"Ok, I think I can do that."

"Good. It was good seeing you, Frankie. I'll see you next Thursday."

"Yeah, see you soon."

I exited the clinic and began my journey home. Peace had settled over me, and weight had lifted temporarily off my shoulders. The ride home blurred, and I drifted from the streetcar to the bus, watching the city move around me. When I made it home, however, the weight returned. Inhaling a deep breath, I opened the door, and Grandma Fran waited there.

"Good evening," I said as politely as I could manage.

Good evening, Frankie. How was your appointment?"

"Everything went fine. Excuse me; I'm going to take a shower." I said before I escaped the room. I paused on the stairs to see and hear what they were saying.

Uncle Auggie stood in the kitchen doorway and watched our short interaction. "Fran, you need to pull out whatever stick you got rammed up your ass. You are driving your only granddaughter away. You ain't blind. I know you see it. " My Grandma Fran didn't answer.

Instead, she left the living room and spent the rest of the evening alone in her bedroom. It was a quiet night spent mostly apart from each other.

Friday morning, I slept in, a small luxury I indulged in every off day. It was nearing ten-thirty when I dragged myself out of bed and into the kitchen. Uncle Auggie read the paper at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

“Sleep well, kiddo?” he signed.

“Yeah, it was nice, but I got a headache. I think my body is too use to waking up early.”

“It might be because you're used to eating early too. I left a plate in the microwave. Fran went out and bought some donuts this morning from Tastee's, some glaze and jelly glaze.”

“Thanks,” I said out loud and heated the plate. “Oooh, you made my favorite.”

Uncle Auggie winked at me over his paper before sliding the ketchup and Tabasco closer. I liberally covered my corn beef hash omelet in ketchup and hot sauce.

“Got anything planned today, Uncle Auggie?”

“Yup, I'm going to have lunch with Miriam. I'm not sure if she's cooking or if we're going out. I hope she cooks. I like her food.”

“You like Miriam.”

“I do, but her cooking is a plus.”

“Why ain't you fat? Uncle Auggie, all you want is food.”

“Food and good company is all I need. I'm a simple man, and that woman is good for both. She pretty to look at too.”

“I'm gonna tell Miriam the next time I see her.”

“She knows, I tell her all the time.”

“Yeah, but I'm gonna tease her till she blushes.” I cackled.

“You better leave Miriam alone and do your work.”

“If you say so... I think I’m going to take a ride in the garden district or go sit in a coffee shop. I might go to the thrift store on Ferret Street. “

“Enjoy yourself, kiddo, just be safe, and if you need me text my phone. I’m going clean myself up for lunch.”

“Yeah, go get pretty for Miriam.”

After finishing my meal and washing the dishes, I got ready to leave the house. I dressed in a loose-fitting sundress and my favorite converse tennis shoes that had seen better days. I piled my curly hair onto the top of my head to ward off some of the heat it drew. I grabbed a sack purse filled it with my wallet, anxiety meds, and keys. From yesterday's work pants, I retrieved the card. On the way out, I grabbed a bottle of water from the kitchen. It was time to visit the shop, but I was going when I was good and ready, past noon and a week late. I was in control for once.



My hearing aids were on my nightstand; I left them there to ignore Fran and all the bickering she had done since I visited Frankie last Thursday. She was pissed that I refused to tell her anything. I wasn’t concerned with her grown-ass having temper tantrums. That shit was old. So, I hadn’t worn hearing aids since then. Fran was in the kitchen when I left my room for coffee. It was a good thing my hearing aids were out because the woman slammed my pots around like a set of drums.

“You bust up my pots, you’re buying new ones.” I said out loud. I probably yelled because I couldn’t hear myself.

Fran continued doing what she wanted, and I sat at the table with a cup of coffee and my newspaper. Miriam and I were going to pick up the muffulettas from Central Grocery and Deli on Decatur Street. She had packed sweets from the bakery the night before, enough of them to feed the whole facility, knowing her. Miriam was sweet like that.

I finished my coffee and went to get dressed. I chose a soft cotton olive green polo and a pair of khaki cargo pants. It was a gift from Frankie. I paired it with the slip-on tennis shoes Frankie bought me. Then I pocketed my keys and hearing aids and left Fran to clank around my kitchen. Outside, I put my hearing aids on in my truck and texted Miriam that I was on my way. It was going to be a nice day, and no matter how Frankie was, I was going to enjoy seeing her. So I made up my mind; this wasn't about me, this was about Frankie.

We picked up the sandwiches and were out on the highway before noon. Miriam was all smiles, enjoying the ride. The ride seemed faster since I had Miriam in the car. She squeezed my hand every so often as I drove. The woman could put a smile on the weepiest of weepiest fellow's face.

We arrived at the facility two hours later. The both of us hustled to get the goodies from the back of the seat. The security guard was kind enough to offer us a hand and took the large box from Miriam.

“Let me help you, ma'am.” He said with a friendly smile.

“Thank you, I could have carried it, but it's good to have a helping hand.” Miriam said with a smile.

When we walked into the facility, Cassandra greeted us.

“Good afternoon, I see you're here to see Frankie,” she said. “And you bought goodies.”

“Yes, ma’am, I got my girl something mighty fine to eat and enough to share with everyone else.” I said and lifted my bag.

“Well, thank you for your generosity. Please follow me. We’re in the art therapy room, again. Oh, and I’m Cassandra. My brother and I work with Frankie and a few others in the facility.” She said, greeted Miriam, and led us towards the back.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Miriam. Miss Frankie is my little bakery buddy and friend. She is a sweet girl, I hope y’all are treatin her well.”

“Oh, yes. Frankie is a sweet girl. Never gives us problems. I have to warn you though, she had a bad couple of days. A little more down than usual. I’m glad to see you here. I have a feeling she’ll be happy to see you.”

We walked into the room, and there were five other people there. They sat at two rectangle tables with markers, crayons, and color pencils piled in the middle. The security guard and I placed the goodies on an empty table. Miriam inched closer to the table where Frankie sat but hesitated. There were empty seats on either side of her, and I sat on her left side, and Miriam pulled out the chair on her right. I hadn’t wanted to startle her. So I grabbed a sheet of paper and a yellow crayon and drew a sun and wrote out, “Hi Frankie,” and passed the sheet to her. She wrote in purple crayon, “Hi Uncle Auggie,” and drew a smile. That was progress from our last interaction.

We exchanged the sheet of paper back and forth, and then she eased the sheet towards Miriam. She wrote a small note to her that said, “You on a date with Uncle Auggie, Miriam?” I couldn’t hold back the laugh as Miriam cupped her warm cheeks.

“Frankie, my girl, you’re horrible.” Miriam laughed.

I watched Frankie look up at Miriam and poke out her tongue childishly, then laughed a husky laugh.

That was my Frankie, and I wanted to hold this moment as close as possible. I wanted it to last. Sparkling brown eyes and a wide grin were all Frankie. I realized that this was only a beginning, and I was willing to do anything for it.

Stranger Danger and White Lies

Chapter 5

I rode the Freret bus to the Good Will. The bus was relatively empty, and I enjoyed the cool air and the silence. It was a little after twelve when I reached the store, and there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. When I entered the store, a stale smell of must, mothballs, and dust hit me full force, with an odor I associated with all thrift stores. I don't know if the smell came from the clothes or if it was the thrift store itself. It was funky, but there was always something unusual, something uniquely old. I don't even know if that makes sense. I don't know if I make sense most of the time, but I loved to walk down the aisles of clothing, and I liked to look for clothes from the sixties or seventies, vintage items. The racks were all jammed packed with goodies. There were several aisles of jeans. I searched the racks for a pair of pants and came across velveteen royal blue bell bottoms. I snatched them up and continued to explore the aisles for something else.

When I left the store, it was 2:45. I spent two hours in the store, bought seven pairs of pants, including the royal blue bellbottoms and a jean jacket with an attractive painted picture on the back. I tucked everything into my bag then headed to get a quick meal from a Vietnamese cafe. I sat in the café eating summer rolls and drinking Vietnamese coffee for another thirty minutes, thinking about if I really should visit the tea shop or go home. The card was working on my nerves. It wouldn't leave me alone, constantly appearing over and over. I had a feeling that if I went home, it would continue to annoy me. "You're a big girl," I told myself, finished the last of my coffee, and left two crisp twenty-dollar bills to cover my meal and the tip. Then I left the small little café and began to walk to the tea shop.

Magazine was a tight little street, cars zipping by, and narrow sidewalks where people had to nearly walk in the street for others to pass. I walked the street back and forth, looking for the address on the card. I walked past the same catholic high school twice. When I finally found the build, it looked abandoned. What was supposed to be the shop was a gutted-out shotgun house with nothing that said the place had been operational in the last year, if not more. This whole situation was utter bullshit. I walked around the shop several times and checked the card over again. It was the address, but nothing was there. I was nearly in tears with frustration with the card and myself. I sat on the curb to calm myself, picked at the Velcro on my hand brace, pulling open and closed.

A tall, beautiful woman with a huge jet-black afro and equally dark skin crossed the street with a few bags in her hand. She smiled then walked past Frankie towards the abandoned shotgun. I watched as the woman walked up to the front door and then vanished into thin air. It startled me, and I believed I was delusional. It was like the streetcar all over again. People did not just vanish into thin air. Sweat beaded on my forehead; the heat must be frying my brain along with the meds because nothing was making sense. I squinted again, covering my eyes with my hand to block out the sun. Then, an invisible outline of another building glittered around the shotgun. I quickly grabbed up my bags and rushed forward. It was the most unbelievable thing I had ever seen. Scanning the area a few times, I wondered if anyone else could see the building. I couldn't believe I was actually going to do this, but with my eyes squinted, my hand extended, I walked towards the shimmering outline of the building. My hand grasped the doorknob; the door sucked me through like a dust bunny in a vacuum.

I stumbled through the door, disoriented. Leviticus Herbs and Teas was an eclectic shop. There was floor to ceiling tiny wooden draws, bushels of herbs hung fresh and dried, and there

were branches and dried ingredient-filled glass jars that were familiar and foreign. The shop had polished cypress wood tables and overstuffed chairs that gave a homey atmosphere. The sound of wind chimes drew me to a sunroom where a tall, handsome man sat with a teacup and saucer grasped between long fingers. He was conversing with another man standing over him with a large cigar tucked between the side of his mouth and between his very white teeth. The man with the cigar had a booming voice.

“You found trouble Fox...sumthin sweet and new...newer and younger than I or you,”
The man chuckled.

The man blew out a puff of smoke that smelled sweet and perfumed, unlike any cigar smoke I had ever smelled.

“Me knows you...Fox. Me know you was restless, but me know no man wants another sniffing his bitch. Unless, you found trouble sumwheres else... to go.” The man said before giving me a look over his shoulder. “Good day, Cherie... mighty fine to see with mine eyes a beauty.”

“Frankie, ignore him. He’s a habitual flirt, and he’s very married to the lovely red head woman sitting over there in the corner.” He tilted his head, and a cow shell decorated loc fell forward. “I do believe, that your wife is waiting on you Baron.”

The man turned and made a grand gesture of a sweeping bow, bowing his bald head and sweeping out his large beefy arms with the grace of a dancer. Then excused himself from the table with a pointed look at Fox and headed for the corner on light feet.

“You may have concluded, by now, hopefully, who I am. I am Leviticus Wright. You may call me Levi or Fox if you like. Most people call me Fox. Please have a seat.”

I shuffled over to the table and took a seat before this stranger. It wasn't very smart, but we were in a crowd, making the decision a little easier. I had witnesses if anything got out of hand. I examined the man before me. He was strikingly handsome in an otherworldly way. His face was angular but in a very masculine way, slightly boyish. Every loc on his head was neatly coiled, some decorated with shells and others gold string. Handsome didn't make him any less dangerous.

"I can assure you that I mean you no harm. I want nothing more than share a cup of tea and conversation. Is that asking too much?"

No," I whispered. However, I thought, "hell yeah, this is too much." And I couldn't stop rubbing the back of my neck to help relieve some of the tension that was building up.

My eyes wandered to the corner of the room. Where raucous laughter was, the redhead and the man, the Baron, were laughing over their cups of tea. The aroma of sweet herbs saturated the room. Mismatched serving trays for what I believe was a take on a British tea sat on various tables. The customers seemed to be enjoying themselves and the mini treats, all the while I felt uncomfortable and sweaty.

"I don't know why I'm here—and this all seems so weird. I'm sitting across from a complete stranger. You could be a serial killer for all I know."

"I am not a serial killer." Levi huffed. "We're not really strangers, Frankie. We have met twice before today."

"You call that a meeting? I call it delusion or a hallucination. It's right up there with seeing the ghosts and I—" I stopped myself from saying that I saw ghosts. It wasn't like the creepy ghost shit like in the movies. But I saw the faces of my family and how they appeared in their last moments.

“You’re not delusional. I am here and you are here and everything in between exist as you see it. You’re free to leave, whenever you please. However, I would prefer if you would sit with me. Wouldn’t you like a cup of tea?”

I was relieved that he didn’t comment on my slip-up. This situation was already insane. I would have to record this as a hallucination. That was the only reasonable answer for what I was experiencing. Before I could try to give a response or move to leave, the beautiful woman I had seen outside handed me a glass of iced tea. I smiled in thanks, taking a sip from the glass, and at the last moment, scolded myself. The tea may have been drugged or poisoned.

“We did not poison the tea. I believe my friend would be quite offended to be accused of poisoning. One shouldn’t question the generosity of others. Not everyone is out there to hurt you, and honestly I’ve no intentions of harming you. I warned you on the streetcar —does that not show you my good will?” Levi said, annoyed. “Casandra’s brew has Valerian root, chamomile, and citrus rinds. So, it should calm your anxiety. It is natural and sweetened with honey. Do you like it?”

I felt thoroughly chastised. So I sipped and savored the taste of floral notes and light citrus. The tea was delicious. My frazzled nerves relaxed. "I like it," I thought to myself.

“I am glad you like the tea. Now, we should get down to business. I wanted to see you for a reason. Just who are you, Frankie?" Levi inquired. He stared at her intently. His hands perched under his chin; wheat gold eyes stared into mine. It felt like he was privy to something about me, and I didn’t know what. I felt a little funny. There was a buzzing feeling in my head. It felt like the start of a migraine headache, and then it was gone.

Now, how the hell was I supposed to answer his question? I didn’t know who I was anymore. I was Frankie Marchand, but who was I? There wasn’t anything extraordinary about

me; I had Erb's palsy since birth. I had bipolar disorder, but I was sure that wasn't a defining point in my identity, or maybe it was. Red-brown hair and freckles were ordinary, well for my family, they were. So what the hell was I supposed to tell him? The buzzing feeling returned and then disappeared. Nervously, I grasped the glass and took another swallow. We sat in silence for a few more minutes, and it seemed to annoy Levi, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

He raised a thick brow. "I was referring to your ability to see the sin eaters, the smell of death on your skin...Are there any other secrets you hide? Tell me." Levi demanded.

I was not too fond of his tone or the condescending look he gave me. I was startled by his demand and lashed out, "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't know anything about sin eaters until I saw them on the streetcar. And it was you who told me what they were. WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT?"

The room went silent, and I knew I had drawn the customers' attention.

"CALM YOURSELF," Levi snapped; then he seemed to realize where he was and gestured an apology and lowered his voice. "I can't think when your making such a commotion in my shop, disturbing the customers. And all the thoughts you're broadcasting makes it even harder to concentrate."

"I'm sorry," I found myself saying. My heart was racing. All eyes were on us. There were disapproving looks shot my way. The Baron and his wife stared, but they focused more on Levi than me, but it was all unsettling.

What the hell was wrong with me? I apologized to him like this was my fault, and I was nearing a full-blown panic attack. I tried to clear my mind, but it wasn't working. When I became this stressed, I tried to think of pleasant memories. My happiest moments were with my twin brother. We were inseparable. The room began to disappear, and I was there, standing with

August, playing in the park near our old house. We were seven years old, and we were each missing our front teeth. I remembered that the missing teeth gave me a lisp. My brother chased me around an old oak tree with roots raised and tangled above ground. August climbed the tree and helped me up onto the massive branches. Our mother sat on a blanket with a book, and our father's head rested in her lap. Daddy called us his snaggle-toothed twins. We were so happy. I was so happy then. "Frankie. Frankie. Frankie." I heard someone calling my name in the distance. My head snapped up, and for a second, I had forgotten where I was. I was back in the tea shop with gleaming eyes staring at me.

Frankie. Frankie. Frankie, there you are, Levi called. *Where is your twin?* Levi asked me. The same buzzing feeling filled my head, and I realized he hadn't spoken out loud. Instead, his voice was in my head.

'He's dead, and so are my parents.' I said in my mind. I felt the same buzz, and I knew he heard me loud and clear. I could tell from the look on his face, and I wasn't sure how I was supposed to process this. Maybe, he's clairvoyant, or he could pick up emotions. I could believe that. It was a possibility, I think.

Levi didn't say anything else. He observed me in silence. I held the glass of tea tightly in my left hand, and my right hand fisted my dress. Levi reached over the small table to gently take the glass from my hand, our hands brushed, and I startled, knocking the glass to the floor. The glass shattered, and the tea and ice spilled everywhere. I scrambled to clean up the mess, my face tinted red with embarrassment. I got on my knees with paper napkins from the table and tried to keep the mess from spreading further. Levi pulled me from the floor and back into the chair. Snapping his fingers, the shattered glass and spilled tea disappeared. A new glass replaced the old one on the table.

“How did you do that?” I asked with eyes wider than saucers. Mind reading had seemed harmless to me. My hallucinations were in my head, with voices and death. Still, this experience wasn’t like any of my usual hallucinations.

“It’s simple. I’m a fox spirit. Magic is second nature to me. I told you this on our last visit. Don’t you remember?” A large conning smile stretched over his copper penny brown face.

As if to emphasize how genuinely second nature magic was to Levi, he conjured a small flame in the palm of his hand. It burned brightly, took the shape of a little person, and proceeded to dance across his palm. It was a fantastic sight, but I found the whole encounter with Levi and everything I had seen in the last week to be implausible and unsettling.

“I don’t know if you’ve had someone put something in the tea or if I finally lost all my mind, but I can’t do this. I ain’t doing this.” I said with a shake of my head.

I emptied my purse onto the table, and again the glass tumbled to the floor and shattered. This time I didn’t try to clean the mess, too busy trying to get to the bottle of Klonopin. I emptied two pills into my hand and swallowed them dry. I ignored the bitter tang. I was shaking as I shoved everything back into my bag. I needed to leave. How had I allowed this to go this far? Why did I come here? I stumbled past Levi and pushed through the door. Before the door closed completely behind me, I could hear a female voice yell.

“YOU REALLY FUCKED UP, FOXIE BOY!”

There was a hollow feeling in my chest, a pulling feeling that hurt when I tried to breathe. I walked away from the shop and vowed it was the last time I would ever grace its door. Surprisingly, I had left nothing behind; all of my bags were in hand. Had they not, I would have considered it a loss because I for damn sure wasn’t going back to that shop. But, like the lady said, “You fucked up.” and regardless of it being focused on Levi, I knew that it also applied to

me. I had fucked up in going there. I should have let the raggedy card continue its crappy magic trick and went on my way, but I didn't, and I couldn't change that. So the day wasn't a total loss. I looked down at the bags in my hand.

“At least, I got my bell bottoms!”

When I arrived home, It was 8:30. I had walked Magazine Street and then sat in the Starbucks on Canal Street. Although I had a shitty experience with Levi, Fox, or whatever the hell he called himself, I didn't want to go home. I wasn't sure if my uncle was there, and I hadn't wanted to disturb him on his date. So, I waited for the 8:00 clock bus. Like usual, the minute I opened the door, Grandma Fran waited on the sofa, this time polishing her nails.

“You're running late don't you think, girl.”

“Good evening, I missed two buses, I had to wait,” I lied.

“You have a phone don't you. You could've called or text.” Grandma Fran looked up from examining the puce colored nail polish on her left hand.

“Yes ma'am, I forgot.”

“See that you don't next time. Go reach me the little battery fan on my nightstand.” She waved me off.

My grandma dismissed me with a blasé tilt of her head. There were no words of thanks, just an air of entitlement. Her attitude reflected that I'm older than you and do as I say motto. So, I did, and then I excused myself. My uncle was still out, and I was exhausted. But, the gaudy Barbie bathroom was calling my name. I needed to wash the crud of this day away and maybe do a load of laundry—no need to carry any bad juju or the smell of funk from the thrift store.

My thoughts were so loud, everything repeating and overlapping until the words blurred and thoughts became voices—each voice louder than the other in a chaotic crash. I submerged,

and the voices quieted as the water entered my ears. Finally, I could only hear my heartbeat, a steady thump in my ears as I tried to hold my breath under the water. I resurfaced when my lungs burned and forced out an exhale, and I inhaled by accident. Choking, I held myself up by the tub's ledge and coughed up water. I rested my head against the tub, and I listened to the noise of the house, the living room TV blaring, and the sound of the air conditioning rumbling on and off with a distinct click. Grandma Fran was either watching a rerun of the Jefferson's or an old movie. I couldn't tell. I sat there until the water went cold. I shivered, but I refused to turn on the heater. The heater growled louder than a chainsaw, and the smell of something burning freaked me out. I got dressed quickly.

Sometime later, I heard my uncle enter the house. I was sitting in the kitchen drinking my third cup of coffee. Grandma Fran was snoring in her room. My uncle entered the house singing a little off tune, but there was a giddiness in his voice.

“Enjoyed your date.”

“Shhh... we don't want Fran to come in here and spoil our fun. But, yeah, I had a good time. She cooked.”

“I just don't get it. Why aren't you fat? You eat like a horse.”

“Cause, I aint.” He laughed.

“So what did y'all do?”

“Nosey little girl. I took her to the movies. We went back to her house for lunch. I had crawfish etouffee and tomato salad. Yup, I had seconds cause that woman is damn good cook.”

“That's all y'all did?”

“Nah, we visited a few friends and played spades for a couple hours with them. I had fun night. Miriam and me made a killing. Geraldine said don’t come no more to her house. She salty now.”

“Hm, so you been gambling... Who is Geraldine?”

“Card’s ain’t gambling, not when it’s three dollars a game.” He laughed. “Geraldine is someone I grew up with. A rowdy one. She politely told us to fuck off, but she sent me home with half a pound cake. Crazy!”

My uncle sat down a container and Ziploc bag with an entire half of the bunt inside.

“She really sent you home with half of it.”

“I wasn’t joking. Miriam sent some crawfish etouffee for you too. You got anymore coffee?”

“Yeah, I made a big pot not too long ago.”

“And how many cups you had? There’s bout half left in this pot.”

“Not too much.”

“Liar! Cut some of that cake for us. I don’t know what flavor it is, but Stokey, Geraldine’s husband, said it was good.”

“It looks good.” I said, cutting nice size chunks for us. I took a bite and hummed.

“That’s damn good... I’m gonna hide this in my room.” Uncle Auggie said, still chewing.

“It is! I taste the sour cream, but she got lemon in it too. Her glaze is just the right texture and it’s not tart, but you still taste the lemon.”

“Lord, you been hanging around that bakery too long.”

“Yeah, but you can’t complain. Miriam’s the one teaching me everything.”

“I’m a good taste tester, huh Frankie?”

“You do more than taste test. You plate test.”

“And I’m good at it. So, you had fun today searching the thrift?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m washing everything upstairs. I found me some bell bottoms and a real nice jacket with a hand painting on the back. Kind of gave me an idea.”

“Oh no! You just stay out my closet. I don’t need no spruced-up kiddie clothes.”

“What you mean?”

“I mean, I’m too old to wear some of them things you keep pushing on me.”

“No you’re not. You wear what you want— age don’t matter.”

“Yeah right. If that was a rule, Fran would still be wearing mini-skirts. Lord knows nobody wants to see that.”

“You so mean.” I said, but I shuddered at the idea. “Ok, maybe you’re right.”

“I told you so.” He laughed. “I’m too wired to sleep. I had so much fun, I’m buzzing with energy. Go grab your shoes let’s take a ride.”

“Ok. I’m going. Where we going?”

“I don’t know yet, but we going. Hurry up and get your shoes. Your PJs are fine for a ride.”

My uncle stood to clear the table, and I scrambled to get my shoes. I slipped my feet into a pair of chucks and grabbed my wallet just in case. Uncle Auggie put his mug in the sink when I got downstairs. He had cleared the kitchen table. He grabbed his keys, and we were out the door and in his pickup truck. We drove on the interstate heading towards Slidell. Immediately, I knew where we were going.

“We going to your fishing spot.”

“How you know?”

“You going to the east on the interstate. You travel the ground when you going anywhere else.”

“I’m gonna trick you up next time. Yeah, I got my fishing poles in the back and we can throw a few lines and talk shit.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

A full moon beautifully illuminated the night sky. I stared out at the sky and enjoyed the ride. Uncle Auggie played jazz on the radio, and we drove in comfortable silence. I wiped the corner of my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt. I don’t know why I was crying. But the tears continued to fall, and my nose began to feel stuffy. I smelled something funny in the air, a sickening familiar smell. I tried not to draw attention to myself. So, I laid my head on the door and wiped my nose instead of sniffing. The moon reflected on the glass, and my mother’s face was staring back at me. She looked sad. Her eyes were teary, but she wore a tight smile. That was the face I saw in the rearview mirror before she died. I could feel the breath leave my body. The smell of smoke filled my nose, burned the inside, and made it harder to breathe. Our car had been smashed and dragged against the guard rails. Daddy’s head lay awkwardly on an angle, tucked between the airbag and the seat, and there was glass and so much blood. My door trapped me, pinned my legs and one of my arms. And shattered glass covered me. My brother lay against the left rear door; his head slumped into the broken glass.

“MAMA! MAMA! MAMA!” I screamed as I reached out to touch August. He didn’t move. Sirens blared in the background, and I barely heard my mother gasp out my name.

“Frankie...” She whispered.

“MAMA! Please, he won’t wake up.”

She stared at me through the rearview window. She tried to smile at me, but it wasn't a genuine smile, just stretched full lips. Mama's head was bleeding, and there was glass embedded in her cheeks.

"Frankie, it's going to be ok. I love you." She whispered.

But it wasn't. I watched my mama's head slump.

"MAMA!!!" I screamed.

"FRANKIE! FRANKIE! FRANKIE! WAKE UP!" Uncle Auggie yelled. He shook my shoulder. I felt him pull me from the door.

"Frankie, kiddo, you alright?"

I sucked in a deep breath, my heart pounding in my ears. I wasn't in the car anymore, but the smokey smell was still there in Uncle Auggie's truck.

"Frankie, you were screaming."

"Bad dream... I'm alright." I lied. "Let's fish."

Blow for Blows, Who Hurts More?

Chapter 6

Every Wednesday, I visited Frankie at the mental health facility with a new treat or something I knew she would like. Sometimes my grandniece was present like she should be, and other times she wasn't. I ached most days thinking about how she had bottled up everything into herself. I didn't she was scared of what I would think, and I felt that we were closer than that. I thought she knew she could talk to me and didn't have to worry about me saying a thing to Fran. But I was wrong, and the doctor didn't have to tell me that much to understand that Frankie didn't feel safe talking. When she did talk, our conversations were a mix of times before the facility and things I think she dreamed up. She called Dr. Warner the Baron. I didn't know who that was until the doctor told me. My papa had been a voodoo practitioner, held the ancestors close, a spiritual man that sat in St. Augustine Catholic Church every Sunday mass. I knew papa taught Colette the ways. Fran didn't appreciate it, and I guess Colette taught Frankie. I knew it was more than that mumble jumble bullshit they showed in movies. It was a spiritual thing, something true and due respect.

I had long given up my pettiness towards Fran, even though she still tried my patience. More people visited the house, in and out they came, church folks toting Bibles and Tupperware. They weren't all Catholics either. Fran had been dabbling back and forth from the Catholic church to the Baptist Church. Because Father Tony pissed her off, he didn't see things her way. So, she found an old preacher with his twisted beliefs on mental illness and suicide being a white people thing. When suicides, that shit was all over the place and didn't matter what color your ass was. You wanted to die, and that was that. Brother Cephas, that man rubbed me wrong,

spouting shit he didn't know. But I let Fran be, and she listened to that bullshit like God himself sent it. I left the house when they came.

Miriam sat with me often, offered me support, and listened to me bitch.

“You know, we didn't understand everything that was going on with Joseph when he came back from Vietnam. I knew I didn't understand what my brother was going through or how what he saw was chiseling a hole in his mind. You know Joe, he was so easy going before he left then he came back and flinched when the screen door slammed.”

Joe had been my best friend, three years older, and shipped out before his nineteenth birthday. Two years later, he returned home half the man he used to be, with a bum leg and a missing arm. He hadn't lasted six months before he pulled the trigger and blew his brains out on his mama's back porch. Now they call that PTSD. I say he saw too much and had to do too much that wasn't right for any human being, and he couldn't live with it all. Shit rotted him from the inside out.

“Joe, was a good man. Could have been so much, Miriam. I knew they was going to kill him one way or the other. He was too good for a war.”

“Yeah, my brother was a sweet boy. My mama never was the same after his death. I don't think any of us felt the same. Frankie's much like Joe, now that I think about it. Sweet and good, but her heart and mind is just filled with things she doesn't know how to work through. I never understood why people are so hard on others. Not like we perfect. Perfections for the Lord.”

“Miriam, I starting to think that there are more stupid people than we think. Maybe, we all stupid at some point or another.”

“Sometimes we are, August. I think some of us refuse to think past what we knows. Thinking it's easier than believing something new. I don't think nothing's wrong with Frankie.

I'm not saying that her mental illness doesn't exist, I'm just saying nothing is wrong with her having it. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to understand that myself. She's still Frankie."

"Exactly. We just need to be there for her and you're doing that. Just have to keep trying to reach her. Show her how much you love her. I know I miss her terrible at work. I don't have nobody to talk to. Well, nobody I want to talk to." Miriam said.

"I just wish Fran would get it through her thick skull. She doesn't seem to care what's really going on. She hasn't been allowed to see Frankie, but I don't know how long that's going to last before she's charging in there with her Bible. I don't know if she reads the thing. I was told God was a loving God. Never heard him trying to hurt a child."

"No, but Fran has to learn things on her own time. She's been that way since we were teens. It's been her way or the highway. You know your sister better than me."

"Yeah, stubborn."



Something strange was going to happen. I could feel it. Everything had gone wrong this morning. The breakfast I prepared turned to ash in the skillet. The water heater had blown out, and as much as Matthew had tried, it refused to light. So, I was stuck taking a cold shower, which I hated more than my charcoal ash breakfast—an urge to pray itched under my skin until I kneeled before the small altar. Pictures of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, Mami Wata, and a few images of relatives long gone from the world stared back at me. I lit a candle and cleansed my hands with Florida water before I clutching my rosary. I couldn't put a finger on the ill-feeling. So, I prayed that they would protect us. I prayed a decade of the rosary, and I called out for protection

from my heart. The weather was harsh, and we had a long drive to work. Matthew paced the floor like a caged animal, irritated and trapped.

“Let’s go.” I said after putting out the candle between my fingers.

We did one final sweep of the house. Matthew and I checked to see that everything was fine. We checked that all the appliances were off. Then we headed to my jeep. Matthew refused to drive in rainy weather. His eyesight was too poor to see through the gloom even with his glasses.

“I don’t know what the hell this feeling is, but somethings feels wrong.”

“I know. That’s what scares me,” Matthew agreed.

We rode the whole way in silence. The roads were dangerous when it rained. We drove by several wrecks pushed onto the shoulder of the highway. It was either careless driving or their tires hydroplaned.

When we finally made it to the hospital, Matthew’s patient Charlie was having a meltdown. He was knocking his head against the wall, and when anyone approached, he swung wildly. Matthew dropped everything and ran. His crock-covered feet squeaked as he skidded to a halt. I dragged our things in front of the break room. Then rushed to help calm down Charlie.

There was blood smeared on the wall. Dr. Warner had to administer a sedative while Matthew restrained Charlie. They were again rocking back and forth on the floor. Charlie cried and screamed until hoarse. I gave first aid and wiped and cleaned Charlie’s face’s blood. The wound was large enough that he would need stitches, but that would have to wait. The sedative required more time to set in, and right now, Charlie fought the drugs. I could feel the persistent itch crawl under my skin. Something told me this was only the beginning.

Charlie fought the meds for nearly an hour, his voice strangled, and his movements were tapering off to mere shakes. Finally, Matthew pulled Charlie to his chest and begged him to close his eyes.

“Please, close your eyes, Charlie. I’ve got you,” My brother chanted like a prayer.

“Charlie closed his eyes slowly, and then he was out.

“We have to stitch that up. I think it’s small enough to use liquid stitches.”

A little farther down the hall, I could see a figure watching us. He stepped more into the fluorescent light. It was Levi, and then it wasn’t. He stood cockily leaned back on his right foot. The sly smile and pointed glare were all Fox.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Matthew looked to where I was looking and gasped, “Fox.”

Fox turned away and walked down the hall away from us and probably the chaos he had started. The bastard. He just wanted to introduce us to his presence. Shit was about to hit the fan.



It seemed like every day since meeting Levi at the tea shop; I got a glimpse of him like he was stalking me, too often to be a coincidence. He was there at the bakery twice a week. I saw him either on the streetcar or waiting for one. I even saw him in other random places. It was like he had become the reappearing card, annoying and even more troublesome than the card had ever been.

Thursday, he sat in the bakery, looming over a corner table with a coffee and a cardamon bun. I peeked out of the kitchen and wished the man would leave, but he sat there as if he belonged. I never wanted to pitch something at anyone’s head as much I did his. One of those cardamon buns that he loved so much knocking him upside his head would be astoundingly

pleasing, or he could get out. Either or would make me happy. Sadly, he knew I couldn't get rid of a paying customer. What dirty tricky bastard. So, I hid in the back and prayed he'd leave before I had to walk to my appointment, but of course, he didn't.

Miriam laughed and thought it was so funny that I was sneaking out the back door. As a result, I left the bakery ten minutes later than I usually would. I might even have to run to be on time, but I attempted to avoid him at all cost. Even if it meant I would have to leave some of my dignity behind. It was worth it.

"Frankie are you sneaking out?"

"Have you lost your mind? Stalking is a crime. Leave me alone." I said and started to run the few blocks to the clinic.

"FRANKIE! I'LL SEE YOU TUESDAY!" He yelled.

"NOT IF I CAN HELP IT- you annoying bastard." I could hear him laughing, but it wasn't funny to me. He was becoming exhausting.

Dr. Warner was waiting in the front office. He made notations in a file and looked up when I barged in.

"I thought you weren't coming, Frankie; you're never late for our appointments."

"Yeah, I know that's usually you." I said flippantly.

"One time, Frankie."

"One time too many. So unprofessional." I huffed.

"Cheeky. So cheeky, Frankie. Come on, Let's go."

We walked down to his office, and I took my usual seat on the lumpy, ugly couch. Dr. Warner set my file on his desk and turned to me.

"So, how are you? Anything new?"

“Not really.” I lied.

You have got to be out of your mind if you think I would tell my shrink that there was some weird animal-human thingy stalking my every move. Yeah, no, I wasn’t going there. I might have to take that one to the grave.

“How are the medicines working for you? For example, do you have to take the Klonopin more often, or is it about the same?”

“I’ve taken more than usually recently.”

“How often are we talking about?”

“I’ve taken more than three times this week. I’ve had a few more panic attacks than usual. I’m not sure why. Maybe stress.”

“Do you know what you might be stressing over?” He picked up his pen and my file and began to scribble in what I knew was tiny scrawl handwriting.

“It’s the same. You know how my grandma is, she makes thing more difficult because I’m trying to stay out of her way. I think she wants a confrontation, but I don’t. I don’t want to deal with it. I have so much on my mind. She never gives me peace, but I’m ok with Uncle Auggie, even though I had a panic attack in his truck.”

“Did you record it?”

“Yes, I did when I got back from fishing.”

“So, tell me what happened to trigger the attack?”

“I was in the truck, and we were heading to Slidell to that little cut-off before the bridge. My uncle likes to fish there. We went out there because Uncle Auggie was wired up. Like he was in a good mood. So, we were going out there to cast a few lines, watch the sunrise, and talk shit. I just started crying, and I didn’t know why. I smelled something weird too. And then as I was

looking out the window I saw my mama's face. I was back in the car wreck. I mean I could smell the smoke and everything. I was right there screaming for my mama's help, and then I saw her die all over again."

"I'm sorry, Frankie. I know you don't want to hear that, but I am sorry that you have been reliving those experiences. What did you smell Frankie?" Dr. Warner began to scribble again before he asked, "Are they effecting your sleep?"

"Smoke. I smelled it in the truck first." Now that I think about it, I smelled the smoke before the panic attack started. "Yeah, you know I don't sleep, but yup, it's been worse. I barely sleep and then I'm up five or six to go to work. Some mornings are even earlier, if I have to bake bread. It depends. I'm tired all the time. Coffee has leveled up to best friend status."

"Are you not taking the sleep aid I proscribed or any over-the-counter sleep aids?"

"Grandma Fran took the sleep aids. I don't think she trusts me with those, and I don't want to ask her for them, because she'll freak out."

"Frankie, I can call her or your uncle. You're of age and I believe your responsible enough with your treatment. If you need aids, I will prescribe you another prescription for you to pick up. I don't like that you haven't been able to use the sleep aids. Everything I prescribe is for your benefit. I have no intentions of ever harming you with unneeded prescriptions. I hope you know this."

"Yes—I know."

Our session ended, and I wondered if it was worth picking up the prescription if I knew that my grandmother would eventually find them. I would have liked to sleep a whole night without dreams. Dr. Warner ordered the medicine at the Walgreens on St. Charles. I decided as I

walked that I would get the meds and at least enjoy one night of sleep. Maybe even hide a few in my room.

I was dead tired, exhausted from kneading dough most of the morning, running away from a deranged stranger, and then having to talk with Dr. Warner. I ached all over. So, instead of catching the bus, I called an Uber from the drug store. The Uber driver was friendly, but I was so tired I couldn't bring myself to talk further than a basic greeting and a smile. I think the driver could tell I was tired too. The older man just smiled and said he would get me home as fast as possible. I thanked him.

The ride was much faster than the bus with its constant stops, and we took the interstate. The traffic had been thankfully light too. When we pulled up at my house, I thanked the driver and watched him pull off. A part of me wished I had somewhere else to go, but I was trapped and tethered to this house. I braced myself for whatever would face when I opened the door. I walked into the living room, where my grandma and a group of church ladies were sitting around talking. Aunt Ida Mae (a close family friend), Mrs. Dolores, and Mrs. Ernesta stared at me when I walked into the room.

“Good evening,” I said.

“Good evening, Frankie,” They all said together like they were rehearsing for the choir. It was kind of unnerving how they stared at me. I tried to keep my face as neutral as possible, not wanting to give Grandma Fran or Aunt Ida Mae reason to keep me with them.

“Frankie, come give me a hand,” Uncle Auggie called from the kitchen.

God, I was thankful for small blessings. My uncle was an angel. I walked into the kitchen.

“Trying to get you away from those old busybodies.” Uncle Auggie signed. His hands caked in flour and cornmeal from coating catfish filets, shrimp, and oysters for their turn in the fryer. I washed my hands and began to stir a pot on the stove, browning ground meat and seasoning for dirty rice.

“You going all out tonight. Trying to show off for the church ladies,” Frankie signed.

Uncle Auggie snorted indignantly. He wiped his hands clean before signing, “Hell, No!” I laughed. Uncle Auggie wasn’t fond of any of the church women in his living room. They were his sister’s friends, and he liked to humor Fran.

“Is the food ready yet?” Aunt Ida Mae yelled from the living room.

“It’s ready when I say it is. Don’t fret my nerves, Ida Mae.” Uncle Auggie yelled. Then signed to Frankie, “Her greedy ass makes me sick.” I nearly choked on the coke I snagged from the fridge. The bubbles burned my nose.

When the food was ready, I took paper plates to each of the ladies. Then, I brought them napkins, cold drinks, and straws. I was about to return to the kitchen when Aunt Ida Mae asked me if my medicine worked. I was startled and turned to see all the ladies focused on me.

“Yes,” I mumbled. I was so embarrassed.

“That’s good to hear; maybe you have more good blood than bad.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Uncle Auggie yelled from the kitchen doorway. “IDA MAE, SHUT YOUR ASS UP!” He was twisting the dishtowel in his hands.

“What? You and I both know that crazy comes from them white peoples. It came from her daddy,” Aunt Ida Mae said.

“What that got to do with anything?” I asked. I could feel tears prickle at the corner of her eyes. I tried to make eye contact with my grandma, but the woman refused to look up.

“Your daddy got a lot to do with it,” Aunt Ida Mae said, but nothing made sense to me. My daddy had been a good man. I loved my daddy, and he loved all of us, even Grandma Fran. Uncle Auggie used to shoot the breeze with him in the backyard on Sundays; now, they talked about him.

“Crazy doesn’t come from black people.” Aunt Ida Mae said as if that answered everything.

“Black people are resilient. We’re built to survive,” Mrs. Dolores said.

Mrs. Ernesta and Grandma Fran amended. Mrs. Dolores chewed on her food and then began to speak again, “Black people have always been able to endure everything. We never needed pills. We prayed to the Lord and moved with faith. These white folks tell you all to swallow this pill and that pill to fix things, but they forget about God. They be experimenting on us. Butchering us for fun. Need to pray more than get doctored on.”

“Y’all sitting here with your self-righteous asses, spouting more horse shit than I’ve ever heard. Ide Mae, your brother, killed himself after the war. You know what happened to our friend Joe, Miriam’ brother. You ain’t calling them crazy. Their heads fucked up from what they saw, and you sitting here spouting shit about bad blood. Was your brother’s blood bad ?” Uncle Auggie snapped.

“Well, Colette should have never married no white man. He brought his bad blood, and look where it got them. A grave and her taking pills because her daddy gave her the crazy.”

I moved past them and up the stairs. But there was no getting away from the rising volume of their voices.

“Can’t nobody give you crazy, and Frankie ain’t crazy. She is grieving. No, different than when Fran locked herself in her room for two weeks after her husband died. Oh, you forgot how long it took you to cope with his loss,” Uncle Auggie said.

“That’s different! I DIDN’T TRY TO KILL MYSELF,” Fran yelled.

“Fran, I don’t know what is wrong with you, but I am sick of you.” Uncle Auggie said in a cold voice.

“There’s nothing wrong with Fran. Her daughter died in that crash.” Aunt Ida Mae interjected.

“And what you think Frankie lost? Colette was her mother. Thomas and August died too. No parents or brother. Just her mean ass and me left to look after her.” Uncle Auggie argued. “You know what, I want all of you out of my house. Get your shit and get out. Don’t look at Fran. This is my house.”

Aunt Ida Mae, Mrs. Dolores, and Mrs. Ernesta picked up their things and took their plates out the door. Mrs. Ernesta apologized to Uncle August before she left.

“YOU HAD NO RIGHT,” Grandma Fran yelled at Uncle Auggie. Fran drew her full lips back tight; her skin flushed with her anger.

“I had every right. This is my got damn house, Fran. That’s my damn grandniece and your granddaughter, and you let them rake her over the coals with some bullshit. What our grandma look like, Fran? Lilly white and green-eyed. You sitting here with all this hate. What you hate Thomas for? He loved your daughter, and Colette loved him too. She even loved your silly ass. Ain’t nobody, but you told them that Frankie was taking medication.”

Fran yelled, “SO, WHAT IF I TOLD’EM. SHE HERE AND MY DAUGHTER GONE! WHO WAS DRIVING THE CAR? HUH? THOMAS!”

“Thomas drove the car, but the truck driver hit them. The man dead and gone, but I never hear you curse him. You angry at Frankie. You think Colette would rather be here than her? You think Colette would rather live without her children? You think she would like how you treat her child?”

“You don’t know nothing.”

“Fran, God is my witness. I knew Colette, and I know for damn sure she would be pissed to see you treat her child this way. Child lost everything in the world, and you sitting your ass up here torturing her for what? Because she tried to kill herself, wanting to be with her family. Shit, why should she want to stay here with you? When did you become God?”

“I ain’t trying to be God. I’m not trying to torture Frankie. I lost my child. My baby is gone, and she don’t even want to be here. Don’t want to live. Why her and not my Colette?”

Uncle Auggie sighed, “You a fool, Fran. You sit here and question the Lord’s doing. He wanted her here. You understand that?”

They were fighting, and I refused to be in this house any longer. A hollow ache filled my chest, and I felt like the room was closing in on me, their voices echoing through my head. In my bedroom mirror, I could see my mama weeping. I could see her peering at me, her face bloody and flecked with glass from the wreck. Yet, she was crying for me. And I couldn’t see any hate in her eyes. Even with the glass, blood, and through tears, my mama looked back at me with love. I believed my mama had loved me right to the end. The last words we shared were, Frankie, it’s going to be ok. And I love you. I needed to get away, far away from my grandmother and this house.

Upstairs, a door opened to an iron fire escape on the back of the house, and I snuck out. I slid through a gap in the fence and began to walk down Elysian Fields. The street was dark and

sparsely lit by street lights. Walking past Brother Martin High School, I spotted a bus. I had to flag down the bus. The driver had thankfully seen me and waited. I used a bus pass from my back pocket and sat across from the driver. The bus was half empty, and the trip was quick. I got off at the beginning of the market and walked over to Royal Street.

Aimlessly, I walked up Royal Street with my hands shoved in my pockets. I sighed in relief when I found cash in my pocket; my ID and bank card. It was another small blessing. The shop windows on the street glowed with yellow lights. Some shops were closed for the night, and others stayed open to cater to tourists. I walked into a few shops on Royal before turning down a side street where a “voodoo” shop sold gris-gris bags, incense, and candles. I came for the Florida water and Mami Wata’s image for my altar, items to cleanse negative energy. Maybe if I bathed in Florida water, the negative energy would bounce off, but I was doubtful with all the anger and resentment my grandmother sent. There was very little that spiced oils could do, but anything helpful, I welcomed. There was a need for my grandmother’s approval, a need for her to look at me like she had before the car accident. I longed for a bond that was snatched away by their deaths. I dreamed that my grandmother would look warmly at me. It was honestly disparaging to remember the warmth and love and know that I may never feel it again. Tonight, my grandmother had spoken her truth, and it clawed away at the last of my hopes.

“Give up, Frankie,” I whispered to myself. I wiped my eyes with the corner of my sleeve. They burned and ached, but I was tired of crying.

Only a few people were in the voodoo shop. A guy dressed in white robes sat behind a table talking to someone, or was he giving a reading; I wasn’t sure. I moved past them and entered the room where the candles and supplies lined the walls. I found the items I wanted then made my way back to the entrance. I stayed in the shop, making conversation with the guy

behind the counter. We talked about Florida water. The guy had grown up with the smell of Florida water mopped throughout his childhood home. My mama had always cleaned up and then sprayed the house with a mist of Florida water and smudged the house with sage. Her father always teased that a bit of juju never hurt. I left the shop with a white bag containing a bottle of Florida water, Mami Wata's image, and a bundle of sage. The guy even threw in a few sweet-smelling incenses. I left the shop to roam the side streets. There was nothing else to do, and I needed to burn off the tension. It was going to be a long night.

Something Amiss

Chapter 7

Fox appeared with the storm, and he seemed to be here to stay. We knew that Charlie's fit had been his work, a reminder of sorts of what he was capable of doing. I remember the first time he appeared; we were sixteen. Levi had taken a beating from his father and fought back this time. Levi's father, Mr. Wright, was an abusive drunk, and the whole neighborhood knew. Even the teachers at school knew that Levi had been a punching bag for his father. Levi had run to our grandmother's house and banged on Matthew's bedroom window. Matthew woke me up after he dragged Levi in. This night he was messed up pretty bad, lip split, a swelling black eye, a gash through his right eyebrow. We were over our heads, couldn't figure out how to staunch the blood. Matthew and I fussed about staunching the bleeding so loudly that my grandmother barged in with her kit. She marched in and moved us aside as she did in her practice.

"You two move out my way. I got this." She told us, and when she was cleaning up our mess. "Baby, Levi, I need you to stay still for me. Looks like you need a few stitches."

"My names not Levi, he's taking a nap right now. You may call me Fox."

I don't think Matthew and I understood what that meant at the time, but my grandmother looked shocked for a second, then she spoke softly to him like he was so fragile he would fall to pieces.

"Fox, why is Levi asleep?" My grandmother asked.

"Ma'am, his daddy beat him, and I took his place. No one beats me."

Since then, Fox took over whenever Levi couldn't handle a situation. He was intelligent, sly, but he became more and more aggressive every time he took over, and he stayed a lot longer.

Then he wanted more control, and Levi fought to regain his place. Levi had won too, but now Fox was back.

Matthew kept a closer eye on Charlie, forbidding any unauthorized interaction. I knew he was lurking, but I wasn't sure where he was and who he set his sights on. That in itself was terrifying.

“Cassandra, have you seen him?” Matthew asked, coming into the breakroom.

“No, and I don't think that he's after Charlie. I think Charlie was a message.”

“Then who? Is he trying to get at us?”

There was fear in my brother's voice. I think that he was unnerved not for his safety but for mine and his patients. I wasn't worried at all. The message was clear, and I was up for the challenge. I never once bowed before him, and I wouldn't start now. We had informed Dr. Babin and Dr. Warner that Fox was on the loose.

“I don't know, but we're not going to allow him to dictate our every move. So carry on like usual, and yes, keep an eye on Charlie; he doesn't deserve any undue stress. But I'm not worrying until I need to.” I said pointedly.

Matthew left the room, and I went to complete my rounds. I walked the quiet halls; not many patients wandered the halls at this time. It was group time for some of the patients, and others were either in one-on-one sessions or completing some form of recreation. I came across Dr. Babin and Dr. Warner talking.

“Good morning, Dr. Babin, Dr. Warner. How are you?”

“Good morning, Cassandra,” they chorused.

“Excuse me, Cassandra. Can I have a moment of your time?” Dr. Babin asked in her thick Irish accent.

“Sure, Dr. Babin.”

“Well, I’ll let you two talk. Excuse me ladies,” Dr. Warner said and turned the corner.

We stepped into her office, and Dr. Babin shut the door behind us.

“I know that Frankie has been in your and your brother’s care. Have you noticed any lucidness while interacting with Frankie? I know you’re aware of what she’s been calling I and Dr. Warner. She mentions cats taking care of her as well.”

“Ah, yes, the cats would be us. I thought it might be because of our scrubs. I’ve been meaning to ask Frankie’s uncle if he might know. However, I haven’t had the chance.” I paused, trying to think of how often my patient had been present, mentally. “Frankie has had very few lucid moments with us. Her uncle has managed to reach her once or twice during his visits. Sometimes it’s because of the treats he brings. Other times it’s a moment where I see her lights up recognition, and then it’s snuffed out just as quickly as it came. Now, her uncle and older lady who works with her cracked through while drawing, and notes slid between them. She was very animated that day.”

“So, the visits with her uncle have allowed some lucidness. I’m happy to hear that. I think I might allow her a little more freedom with art therapy, maybe we can supply her art supplies for her room or some more stimuli from home other than treats.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me. Frankie’s very talented. I think her uncle will be in today.”

“Yes, if possible, will you inform of when he arrives. I’d like to talk to him as well.”

“Sure thing, Dr. Babin.”

“Thank you, Cassandra.”

I left Dr. Babin's office and walked to Frankie's room. She had been less responsive this morning, restless and tired at breakfast. I'm not sure the girl slept much last night. I brought her back to her room to rest after eating. When I arrived at her room, I peeked through the observation window. Frankie was in her bed, but instead of sleeping, she was talking to someone. I could quite distinguish who was sitting in the chair as the back was facing the door, and I drew the curtains earlier. I subtly cracked the door.

"Fox, is that you? Where's my friend, Levi?"

I watched as Fox turned the chair, aware of my presence.

"It's just me now; I'm letting Levi rest for a while. And, so, I've come to visit you. Isn't that right, Cassandra?" Fox smirked.



The night drew on, and aimlessly I roamed for an hour up and down the side streets, avoiding Bourbon and its drunken crowds. My feet and back began to hurt; working longer hours at the bakery and the stress from that spectacularly hurtful conversation tired me out, not to mention the uneven streets. I searched for a place I could rest. There was a small restaurant and bar at the corner. The smell of fried food and the promise of a seat drew me in. I hadn't had a chance to eat today.

"Welcome, it's just you, baby?" A portly older white woman asked. She had a friendly smile painted pink and eyes lined in bright blue shadow. She even had a blond pompadour hairstyle crowned with a pink bow.

"Yes, it's just me," I said, giving her a small smile, then followed the women through the bar to a dining area.

“Well, it’s good to have you. I’m Betty. We got a special tonight. Jambalaya and catfish nuggets. My husband, Maynard’s special. It’s good, hun. My favorite thing here, but I’ll let you see the menu while I get you something to drink. What you want, sugah? We got coke products, tea, and lemonade.”

“A coke, please.”

“You got it, sugah. I be right back.”

I sat down and enjoyed the feeling of relief. I placed my bag on the table. My stomach growled.

“Here you go. Do you know what you want to eat?”

“I’ll get the special.”

“Good choice, my dear. Let me go tell Maynard.” She said, pleased.

I scanned the crowded room. The room was small; tables lined the walls seating four at most. Betty sat her in a corner seat close to their kitchen. They had vinyl table cloths on each square table in red. It was a shabby little joint that had probably been tucked away here for years. I liked these little gems. They made me feel more at home than fancy places. The food was always excellent, and the service felt like family, welcoming. A table behind me was loud with laughter; I nosily peered back to catch a glance. I spotted Levi and the woman from the shop, but I couldn’t remember her name. They were sitting with a boisterous man as pale a moonlight. Frankie noted that the man’s hair was the same color as his skin and in locs that were fluffy like a cat. In her mind, she saw him morphing into a sleek cat with heterochromia eyes. I shook my head. I had no idea why I thought that.

“Because he’s a cat,” Fox said with a smile. And then, he stared directly at me.

“Whose that, Boss?” The man asked.

“A girl from a streetcar,” Fox winked.

“Will I ever get away from you, stalker,” I mumbled to myself.

“This time, it’s you who became the stalker. I was here first, darling Frankie,” He laughed.

The man got up from his chair and walked over to me. In the dingy light, he seemed to glow, dressed in gray slacks and suspenders. Even his smile was catlike, sharp. And the man had one blue eye and one a golden-brown eye.

“Hello, darling!” He cooed excitedly.

“Matthew, leave her be,” Fox ordered.

Matthew quaffed, “Come on, Boss. She’s so pretty, and no one should eat alone. Right sissy?”

The woman at the table smiled with a smile just as sharp as the man. They were like the night sky, a glowing moon and black starless sky, beautiful and mysterious. The man gathered up my things, moving me to their table without any qualms. I hadn’t even realized I had moved until I was sitting in front of Levi. These people, were they people? It didn’t matter. They were stunning. All of them were stunning. Frankie was very plain in comparison.

“I’m Matthew. That’s my sister Cassandra and you know the Boss.”

“Your sister?” Frankie asked, looking between them.

“Yup. My twin sister. Isn’t she pretty? She took after dad; he’s an Egyptian Mau. But Cassandra lacks the spots.”

“I have spots, Matthew,” Cassandra corrected.

“Sure, you do, and I’m an albino tiger,” Matthew snorted, and Cassandra swatted at him.

Betty strolled up to the table with plates of food. She spotted Frankie and smiled. “Oh, I see you made friends. Your food should be coming up next. Let me check.”

Everyone at the table waited for my food to come before eating. The food smelled incredible, and my stomach growled loudly, the jambalaya piled high, and golden fried catfish nuggets flanked the plate. The first bite was heavenly; I hummed, pleased, and rocked in my seat. “We have another dancer at the table.” Fox laughed as Matthew and Frankie rocked with enjoyment.

“Don’t worry about him. He doesn’t know how to appreciate good food. Her neither,” Matthew grumbled.

“Fox, it was cute when he was a kitten, but he’s too damn old now.” Cassandra huffed.

It was strange how I ended up in this restaurant with Levi. The tension in my body had released with the pleasant banter. A month ago, I was pretty sure that I would have run from Levi on sight; he seemed to be everywhere I went, and it was annoying as hell, but here I was, laughing with him, Matthew, and Cassandra. Cassandra was witty and acted like being around her brother was off-putting until her smile stretched wide with laughter. I didn’t quite believe that Cassandra and Matthew were cats. Seeing was believing, and I needed proof before I could take their word. The image earlier could be from stress. I watched as new people filled tables around them. Matthew had ordered dessert for the table. Boozy bread pudding studded with pecans and covered in a banana foster rum sauce. It was deliciously soft and creamy. The best bread pudding in the city, Matthew claimed. I had to agree. The food filled her belly, and Frankie was beginning to feel lethargic.

“Come on, darling. Let’s go for a walk,” Matthew cooed and offered his arm.

“Ok,” Frankie agreed with a smile.

“I think we should get some coffee,” Cassandra suggested

“You offering to make us a cup? We stayed at Maynard’s longer than usual, and it’s after ten.” Fox asked.

“Yeah, I’m offering tonight. Don’t get used to it.” Cassandra quipped.

“Oh, god, no! Her coffee’s like tar. Come on, Frankie, we got to find a store open to get creamer. My sister like’s sludge, and it’ll keep you up for days. Take my word for it.”

“My coffee’s not that bad,” Cassandra yowled like a cat.”

“Not that bad, my ass. My entire ass. I brushed my teeth and could still taste it.”

Matthew dragged me along with him and laughed rowdily.

We left the restaurant with the promise of coffee and on the prowl for coffee creamer. Surprisingly, we began to walk amongst a crowd. People were partying and laughing as they went, but they seemed almost transparent. There, but not there, and I question whether the booze from the bread pudding was too strong; maybe they didn’t cook it off long enough, or perhaps it messed with my meds. On the other hand, I was exhausted; that could be it. Matthew weaved through them, avoiding every little transparent person.

“Excuse us, coming through. Oh hello Paulie, how you?” Matthew said, pausing in the middle of the street as he talked to a big man dressed in threadbare clothes and had a shackle around his ankle.

“I’s good Matthew, I’s enjoys my time here. “

“That’s good to hear, where you gonna be next week? We need to have a chat.”

“O’Matthew I’s be around you know where to find me.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you. Keep on the lookout. See you, Paulie!”

“Is this really?” I whispered.

Matthew leaned his head to me. One of his locs grazed my face and said, “As real as you and me. Come on Frankie, we got to find some coffee creamer.”

I don’t know why I followed. I didn’t understand what I saw around me, a procession of the dead. Paulie appeared to be enslaved at one point in life or was it death. The partying looked like a funeral—the final send-off before being laid to rest. There was a second line band and all. A large round-bellied man blowing a tuba with jaws stretched out like thin balloons. I saw transparent women dressed in various outfits, from Tignons wrapped heads and gathered stripe skirts to one particular lady dressed in a mini skirt and go-go boots. They dance amongst themselves, uncaring of knocking into the occasional living person. It was their time, their moment, and somehow I was aware of just how thin the veil was between the living and the dead. And as I looked at the straggling drunks that fumbled around those partying dead people, stumbling a little more, pushed out of the way. I thought about why I continued to follow Matthew, who, to anyone else, would look like a drunk as he crisscrossed the street. I guess I was lonely; I hadn’t had friends since the accident, everyone leaving and thriving while my life crumbled apart. Matthew seemed so wonderful, cheery, and kind. He latched on to me at the restaurant, and he was dragging me along like we were old friends. I wanted that, and I needed it more than I had ever processed.

I don’t know why I followed. I didn’t understand what I saw around me, a procession of the dead. Paulie appeared to be enslaved at one point in life, or was it death. The partying looked like a funeral—the final send-off before being laid to rest. There was a second line band and all. A large round-bellied man blowing a tuba with jaws stretched out like thin balloons. I saw transparent women dressed in various outfits, from Tignons wrapped heads and gathered stripe skirts to one particular lady dressed in a mini skirt and go-go boots. They dance amongst

themselves, uncaring of knocking into the occasional living person. It was their time, their moment, and somehow I was aware of just how thin the veil was between the living and the dead. And as I looked at the straggling drunks that fumbled around those partying dead people, stumbling a little more, pushed out of the way. I thought about why I continued to follow Matthew, who, to anyone else, would look like a drunk as he crisscrossed the street. There was also the gleam of bugged-out eyes glowing in the dark and chattering noise I knew now to avoid at all cost. I guess I was lonely; I hadn't had friends since the accident, everyone leaving and thriving while my life crumbled apart. Matthew seemed so wonderful, cheery, and kind. He latched on to me at the restaurant, and he was dragging me along like we were old friends. I wanted that, and I needed it more than I had ever processed.

We made it to Walgreens on Canal Street; Matthew spearheaded it through the store, searching for coffee creamer. I giggled as Matthew searched the aisles then the refrigerated section.

“Please have creamer...please...please,” Matthew chanted while he searched.

Cassandra ignored her brother. Levi snickered while pulling cookies and snacks off of shelves. Matthew screeched and held a small bottle of French vanilla creamer in the air like a trophy.

Matthew crowed, “THANK YOU, LORD!”

Levi cackled, “Oh, my, Cassandra is your coffee really that bad? You make such lovely tea.”

“Tea, she can do! Divine creations made with herbs and spices, but the woman brews coffee like the devil's brew.”

We laughed at Matthew's antics. The man carried the creamer like a babe resting on its mother's breast. Levi and I followed after him and Cassandra. The siblings were fighting in the line, and it reminded me of how I had acted with my brother. Everything reminded me of August lately. I missed him.

"It's ok to miss him," Fox said.

Frankie nodded, "Yeah, I know."

"Good, now let's pay for this and catch up."

Cassandra and Matthew lived on Dauphine street in an apartment that was once a slave quarter. We walked through a small courtyard to stairs that led to a plant-covered balcony. Matthew hiked up the stairs with his creamer dangling from his wrist in a white plastic bag.

"Come on, Frankie. We need to beat Cassandra to the kitchen."

"Just make the God damn coffee, fool!" Cassandra yowled.

A plush sofa and chairs furnished their apartment, and art covered every spare inch of the walls with bright images of skies, landscapes, and portraits of cats and humans. There were plants on side tables on shelves, and large pots stood in front of windows.

"Your home is beautiful," Frankie told Cassandra before Matthew dragged Frankie to the kitchen. He pulled a pack of CDM coffee out of the cabinet.

"Please, Frankie, say that you like chicory coffee. I might die if you say Folgers."

"Ugh!"

"Oh, good! You were raised right." Matthew said while clutching the front of his shirt dramatically.

Matthew put on a pot of coffee in an old stovetop percolator. Cassandra came to get a few things out of the fridge and cabinets, and a few minutes later, we talked around a coffee table in

the living room. Levi opened a tin of butter cookies and offered them to the group. These were nostalgic cookies covered in bits of sugar.

“Damn old people cookies; you ain’t got no Oreo tucked away, Boss,” Matthew asked.

“HEY!” We protested.

“I LIKE BUTTER COOKIES,” I yelled at Matthew.

“How old are you, again? Eighty-seven?”

“Nineteen.”

“Awe, your still a teen... God, Boss, this one’s young. She’s in diapers compared to us.”

“Speak for yourself; I’m spry,” Cassandra laughed.

“No one says spry. You’re an old bird, Cassandra.”

The four of us laughed and talked well after midnight, and I was nearly dead on her feet. But, even though we were laughing and joking, something in my mind said to be careful. Nothing was ever as it seemed.



Fran disappeared this morning, I wasn’t sure where she went, but she was gone way before 8:00 a.m. So today, I rifled through Frankie’s room and pulled a few pictures from her mirror, grabbed a few books that littered her dresser, opened to various pages. They were folk tale books and nature books showing breeds of cats and foxes. They were things I knew she used for her artwork. I put everything in a grocery bag and grabbed the pound cake I asked my friend Geraldine to make for Frankie.

I arrived in the parking lot, where I saw Fran’s coral pink Chevy Spark. I could spot that ugly little piece of shit anywhere. I grabbed everything out of the passenger seat. When I walked in, the nurse, Patrice, looked aggravated. I checked in at the desk.

“Good morning, I’m checking into see Frankie.”

“Mr. Moon, good morning. I’m sorry, but would you mind meeting with Dr. Babin first. She’s the other psychiatrist working with Frankie.”

“That’s fine. Thank you, Nurse Patrice.”

Nurse Patrice led the way to the doctor’s office. It wasn’t far, straight down the hall on the corner, right-hand side. The door was closed, and you could hear angry voices, the nurse knocked twice, and the door swung open. Fran was sitting in the chair before the doctor’s desk. A pinkened face and mused hair greeted me.

“Hello, please come in, Mr. Moon.”

As I walked in, Fran refused to meet my eyes. Instead, she looked no farther than the Bible in her hands.

“Mr. Moon, as I was trying to explain to your sister. We have worked to have Frankie respond to some different stimuli. As you know, we’ve had periods of times when Frankie regressed.” Dr. Babin said, the last bit fired at Fran.

“Yes, I brought somethings for Frankie today.”

“Yes, thank you, she seems to respond more frequently with you. I wonder if you might supply more personal items. The treats are fine, but I believe personal items will lead to a better response and more lucidness. She’s responded well to art therapy.”

“I thought so too. So, I got a few things from Frankie’s room. I didn’t take much cause I didn’t know what was allowed. But I got a few pictures of family and some books she’d been rifling around; I know she likes to draw fairytale-like things and animals. So, I bought a few of those,” I said while I emptied the bag.

Dr. Babin looked through the items. First, she seemed to look at all the books. Then, Dr. Babin read a few bits that Frankie highlighted and the notes written in the margins.

“Yes, this is great. Thank you! Now that we have settled on Frankie’s personal items, I must discuss things I cannot allow here during Frankie’s rehabilitation. First, Mr. Moon, I am glad that you have taken the initiative to reach out to Frankie. However, Ms. Moon, with all due respect, you have been uncharacteristically opposed to Frankie’s condition and treatment. My usual protocol would be to have individual sessions between my patient and her family members. However, I don’t think that you, Ms. Moon, would agree.”

“YOUR DAMN RIGHT ABOUT THAT!” Fran yelled.

“Ms. Moon.”

“Fran, shut up! I’m sorry Dr. Babin.” I shot a glare Fran’s way.

“This is one of the things I cannot allow. This facility offers rehabilitation and stability for patients dealing with psychiatric issues. I cannot have you disturbing the patients in our care. My colleague Dr. Warner has expressed this to you before. I feel that you have not considered the warning, and I will step in if I must for the care of Frankie. Be forewarned that I will not hesitate to act on behalf of Frankie.”

“YOU CAN’T DO SHIT. I HAVE GUARDIANSHIP!”

“Yes, you do for now, but I am one of Frankie’s doctors, and I can contest your guardianship at any time based on whether or not I see you as an endangerment to my patient’s wellbeing with a call to social services. And I am by no means threatening you.”

Fran flew out the door angrily. I had never been so embarrassed in my life. This woman probably thought we were ignorant and ass-backward.

“I can’t say how sorry I am. Please excuse me.”

I walked out of the office only to find Fran confronted by a young man in scrubs.

“Frankie doesn’t want you here. I don’t want you here. Leave.”

His voice was chilling, a deep growling tenor. It must have frightened her because she hurried out of the hospital. The young man never turned to face me. He just walked away and disappeared around another corner.

“Shit, that kid is scary.”

Are You Friend or Foe?

Chapter 8

For months I saw no signs of Levi. He completely disappeared, and the man left behind was no friend of mine. Yet, somehow he became a fixture in Frankie's day-to-day life. He followed her like a puppy on a leash, but there was something off about his fixation. Something that seemed insincere. I never liked this side of Levi, no matter how much I wanted to separate the two. Under duress, this personality formed. Fox was a fractured part of Levi, created to face violence with violence. He fought tooth and nail and wanted control believing he was entitled to be at the forefront because Levi was weak.

Fox was a constant whisper in Frankie's ear. I asked whether it was a good idea to have him around Frankie, was it safe, and Dr. Warner and Dr. Babin agreed that Fox needed watching but avoid aggravating Fox. No one wanted him to react negatively. He was much like a child with a new toy and acted like a toddler having a tantrum when someone took the toy away. So, we watched him, listened closely to hear what he was telling Frankie. So far, it had only been little imaginary stories, continuations of what Frankie had spoken.

"You know Frankie, I know the Baron. He and Maman rule the city at night. I once saw them in the graveyard drinking and dancing near Marie Laveau's gravestone. The voodoo queen was a favorite of theirs." Fox once told her while Frankie drew a picture of dancing animals around a fire in a wooded area.

"I know Fox, you told me before."

I saw no harm in a few fairytales, but it made me question how long-ago Fox had surfaced. Fox was found in her room reading aloud the books Frankie's uncle left behind. He asked questions about Frankie's artwork. Frankie interacted, talked, and showed more emotion

than she ever had, and Fox influenced it, which was strange. Their interaction completely unsettled Matthew, so he stayed close. He talked to Fox as casually as he had with Levi, but it was all a bit unsettling. Matthew even humored Fox by calling him Boss, which inflated his ego. I stayed far enough away but was still in sight to intervene. My presence often agitated Fox. He paced the room like a caged animal if I was closer than necessary. I had helped confine him once before, and he knew I would again. Levi was in there. Levi was just as much a brother as my twin, and he always would be. I fought fiercely for my loved ones and those under my care. My fight for Frankie would be no different. We locked eyes across the art therapy room, and Frankie turned to see what Fox was watching.

Frankie waved, “Hi Miss Kitty.”

“Hello, Frankie. Your painting is beautiful.”

She smiled shyly, ducked her head, and turned towards the painting. Fox echoed my words, and her cheeks reddened. The girl soaked up praise like someone deprived, but I knew her uncle loved her dearly. The man was here on Wednesday, rain or shine. It was a dedication that I hadn’t seen with many of our black people. Of course, they would visit, but many of them seemed out of place. They were combative with treatments, and God, did they freak when the doctor mentioned schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or personality disorder. I think most of the time, fear ruled them. So every time I saw Mr. Moon, I wanted to praise him for supporting Frankie.

Mr. Moon came weekly and wasn’t bothered by her attention to Fox. Fox sat at the table with them and watched them interact but rarely spoke on those visitation days. While their conversations were still jumbled messes of what Frankie experienced now with Fox, her delusions, and her life before the facility, I believed the man held onto whatever Frankie gave.

He never showed a bit of sorrow in front of her, and I knew he had a lot. I think we all held a lot of heartache for the mental backslide of our loved ones. And it was all an array of masked emotions and “keep your chin up” kind of things that you used to hold yourself together, and it really sucked.



After the night with Levi and his friends Matthew and Cassandra, months passed, and I saw more and more little oddities around the city. I tried not to make it evident that I saw the dead walk with the living. Still, it seemed almost crazy. The veil was super thin. The only thing that scared me was how many sin eaters roamed over the city. They were everywhere, and they followed different people, people that looked at the end or lingered on in despair. I saw them around the homeless on Canal Street and under the bridge. Their eyes glowed brightly in the sun. They stayed their distance from me, which put me at ease, but the problem was knowing what they did. It was scary that they were eating on the people they clustered around. People I knew struggled with being pariahs because of their homelessness, and many of them had a mental illnesses. I wondered if this would be me if I would one day live on the streets because I lost my mind.

Levi, Cassandra, and Matthew became more frequent in my life. Finally, one day, Matthew traipsed around in cat form and showed up at my house. It was crazy, but Matthew made himself at home, saying, “I’m here to protect you from the bugged-eye freaks. They’re becoming a pain and they like your house now.” At the time, he scared me shitless because he was resting on my chest, licking my nose.

“You know that’s freaking weird considering I know your human self. I mean, would you lick my face then?”

Frankie, I am a cat now. I don't have cat urges when I am human, it's different. Plus, you had a little boogie.

“Oh My God! You're disgusting. You just admitted to licking boogers. I mean, how is that acceptable?”

I'm a cat. It is a cat thing, grooming. We like to groom things that are out of order. It was just sitting there and all crusty on your nose. I had to fix it for you. I was making you cute again.

“Matthew, please don't. Not ever. I might die of disgust.”

Ok, I'll let you be crusty from now on. Matthew said and licked his white paw, right between the little toe beans.

He climbed down the stair with me for breakfast. My eyes bucked; the cat slinked into the kitchen and perched himself in a chair. Uncle Auggie sat across from the cat and stared.

“You have a cat now.” Uncle Auggie said, astonished.

“Um, yes. That's Matthew; he's an albino Egyptian Mau. He has an uh...a sister that's all black with no spots. They're kind of rare for their breed,” I strung together what I learned at that dinner so many weeks ago.

“That's fine and all, but he needs to get his ass from out my kitchen when I start cooking. I don't find cats in my pots cute; you hear that cat?” Uncle Auggie said and stared over the morning paper. Matthew bobbed his head but didn't move. “Smart cat. We'll get along just fine if you remember that.”



Father Tony met with me every Friday after mass. I had taken him up on his offer, and I relied on his help to navigate through the messiness of Fran, my emotions, and Frankie. Today,

we shared a meal at a seafood joint in Buck town. Over shared plates of raw oysters and fried seafood, we talked.

“How has everything been going with Frankie?” Tony said and wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

“I wish I could say there’s been a significant change. Frankie’s still mixed up, but she responds more now. She’s reliant on staff members, and there’s a young man that seems to have attached himself to her. I don’t know if I care for him very much. He’s kind of creepy, but he hasn’t done anything to hurt Frankie. You see, he’s the one that scared the crap out of Fran so many weeks ago. I should like him for that alone.

“Now, that’s just not right. Your happy he scared Fran?” Tony laughed.

“Hell, yeah! Fran deserved it and so much more. You know what she did. I was scared that they were going to have social services on our butts. I don’t want anyone barging all up in my house, and I would be so pissed if I lost Frankie. God would have to forgive me, but I would hurt Fran.”

“How is Fran? I think I see her sometimes, and then I don’t.”

“That’s because she still sees Brother Cephas. Don’t get me started on that fool. I’m this close to knocking him out.” I said and held my forefinger and thumb with not an inch of space between them.

“You have to pray for people and yourself. But as your friend, if it makes you feel better, knock him out. Sometimes even god had to punish the wicked.”

We laughed and talked some more over food. And the man could eat, and oh was he nosey about Miriam and me. He seemed to interrogate me on the slick side. He hadn't changed much since our childhood, and I was so thankful to have his friendship.

I left the restaurant in high spirits; my day was going beautifully. I took the scenic route home and rode the lake until I reached Elysian Fields. It was so beautiful, the waves high because of the cold weather and choppy winds. It had a gray-white cast but still managed to be so calming. I cracked the window and let the cold air in, bundled up enough that I could enjoy the crispness. I had taken some of the leftovers for Fran and even ordered a bread pudding for her. We needed to hash things out finally. I needed to talk, which was something we hadn't done in a long time.

The house was pleasantly warm. Fran was sitting in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea when I walked in.

"I brought you some leftovers from Deannie and a bread pudding."

"What for?"

"Fran, I'm your brother and we need to talk." I said and took a seat across from her.

"They got more hot water in the kettle; you want me to get you some?"

"Yes, thank you."

I watched her move around to get my mug and another tea bag. I missed this, the subtle things we shared once upon a time. I wasn't sure how this would go, but I missed my sister, and

it hurt to be so distant while in the same house. I understood so little about her feelings, but this was killing me. My God, it choked me. When she sat down, and I fixed my tea the way I liked with milky and sweet, I knew this was going to be complicated. I saw in the way we both looked guarded.

“Fran, I can’t take this any longer, the animosity that we have in this house. The spitefulness that seems to consume you, and God, I know this whole ordeal has put us all in more pain than we could ever swallow down. We can’t swallow it all, but I can’t understand you. We spent seventy-three years together reading each other’s palms like fortune tellers, shared and kept secrets between us, and I don’t know where that’s gone.”

She sat there silently and stared at her tea like it would reveal an answer. Where could this possibly go if she wasn’t willing to speak? I held my breath and played with the cup of tea in my hands. Finally, she pressed her hand to me. I raised my head, and there were tears.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I can’t cope with this. I can’t do this... What happened to me Auggie?”

“I don’t know Fran, but this isn’t you.”

“I lost my baby. I lost my husband and my daughter, and my grandson. And I lost a son-in-law too. I lost them all.”

“But you didn’t lose me, and you can change things with Frankie.”

“How? I drove her there and I blamed her and I’m still trying to. The bible—”

“The bible teaches love Fran. It teaches us to love thy neighbor. Papa taught us to keep close to family— that even our ancestors were here to help. They help us remember. Why Fran? Why hurt her so bad?”

“I wanted Colette so bad. I wanted them all back, and she wanted to die. How could you want to die? “

“Pain, Fran. Pain made me crawl down the bottle when my wife and son died. Pain made me wish to be numb; I didn’t care about the consequences either. I never admitted it, but now I see that I wanted to die too. I hurt so bad. We’re all so different. Don’t you remember Joe? You loved Joe once and you hurt after he took his life, but you understood then. Why not now?”

She clutched the cup and bowed her head over it. She always cried ugly, blotchy cheeks, snot nose, and loud. I pulled one of her hands from the cup and held it between mine.

“You never had to do this. We could have done so much more than war against each other. We could have talked and talked with someone. Instead, you ran off, and you let your pain fester into hate. I was so wrong to allow you to hurt alone, but I tried so hard to buffer Frankie. I failed you both. And I think I didn’t know how to pick up the pieces when you always had for me.”

“No, Auggie. You didn’t,” Fran said and sniffed a snotty snort sound.” You didn’t fail me. I messed up bad with you and Frankie and I’m so sorry,” She snorted back again.

It was nasty, and I could hold back the chuckle that escaped me, “OH, GOD! That’s so nasty.”

“Shut up Auggie. Don’t make me laugh.”

“You ready to work this out?”

“Yes,” she signed because she couldn’t speak with all the sniffing.”

“Good, now stop inviting those assholes to my house. And if I see that cockroach Brother Cephas I will hurt you after knocking his ass out. Father Tony gave me permission.”

“Wait, What? Father Tony.” Fran sputtered.

Who's Frankie?

Chapter 9

At the tea shop, I met the Baron again. He invited himself to my little corner table. He and his wife gathered up all their English tea and brought it over to share with me. They even had a floral china cup and saucer for me. I was shocked by their kindness and maybe a little overwhelmed by their larger-than-life character. I wasn't even presentable. I had a rough day. I fought with my grandma, and her words cut deeper. She blamed me for my mother's death. She blamed me for all of their death. "You're the reason, it's the devil you carry," she said, and it rung in my ears. I cried on the way to the shop. The tears fell so hard that a little old Spanish lady gave me a handkerchief and patted my arm. I knew I looked a mess. I knew my face was flushed, and my eyes were probably crusty and red-rimmed because they felt itchy and hurt. But they smiled at me. The Baron gave me a jaunty little bow.

"The beautiful Frankie with red curls. Not as red as me wife, but still a lovely shade of red. We brought tea. Some sweets to eat."

"Hun, hims an arse on a good day, don't pay him a cent. He'll flirt with his shadow. I gots a real nice earl gray no herbal today. A little to chilly for that. We need a little something stronger for the weather. Have you eaten love?"

"No," I said and tried to clean my face with my jacket sleeve.

"Well, fuck, here love. I got tea sandwiches, and we'll call mangy fox for more."

We ate together, Baron and Maman talking animatedly, including me in the conversation like we were old friends. It was nice. They listened to me with great detail, and I felt freer telling them about my grandma. But, Lord knows, she would have an absolute fit if she knew. She was a

stickler for her private matters remaining private, but she never gave a damn about anyone else. Finally, Levi pushed an empty table next to us, and he, Cassandra, and Matthew joined.

“So, you left early to get here, Matthew. Got tired of my house and all the scraps my uncle gave you?”

“Hell, no! I would happily live with your uncle all nine of my lives. He cooks like a professional, the best grub I’ve ever had.”

“That’s why you get tubby my little furball,” Maman said. She rubbed at Matthew’s belly to emphasize. The whole table laughed while Matthew grumbled.

“You try giving up free food, and I mean the good stuff like Coubion. It was heavenly. He didn’t overcook the fish, and the sauce was so flavorful. I could eat some right now. Screw these tea sandwiches.”

I snorted loudly, and it started another round of laughter. *It’s so good to hear you laugh. Won’t you stay with us? We want you to stay.* Fox whispered in my head. So I did. I felt so relieved that I skipped work and my doctor’s appointment and hadn’t cared. Instead, I stayed and enjoyed the freedom to laugh so openly. I wanted this for myself. I didn’t know who I was anymore, but I could be a new Frankie if they let me.

Stay with us, Frankie. You could be whoever you want. We don’t mind. Fox whispered in my head.



Fragile, that’s how I saw Frankie. She was like the dolls that my Mama Tess would have shown off in her china cabinet or kept tucked away in her chifforobe. Frankie was like porcelain cracking around the edges but still held together by the glaze, and a thin layer of glue you prayed would stop it from falling apart. Mama Tess had one she wrapped in a piece of silk and tucked

away because it was her mama's doll. Frankie was busy as a toddler; when Frankie could talk, it was bright and full of questions, and the whys were quickfire. Then she began to quiet, and August was shining like a roaring sun, and Frankie glowed like a moon, still full of light, but less so.

Every moment, I cherished time spent with Frankie. I loved the smile and the quirks she picked up from me in the kitchen. She was so much like her mother, a comforting spirit, and even though her soul was melancholy like all old souls tend to be, she used it to make her art flourish. She was stubborn the like glaze and glue; she held her pain behind it all, masked under pretty. The girl was my family—the only bit left of Colette, who was just as much my child as Fran's. We shared everything, the good and the bad, me and Fran.

Delicate, I remembered that's how it felt so long ago when Frankie swaddled in baby blankets, was rested in my arms. Though it hurt to know I would never have a grandchild of my own. She was the best grandniece I could have asked for, and she and her brother were like a new start, a way for us to witness life start all over again.

Wounded, we allowed the wounds to fester and infect Frankie like poison, and it weakened her resolve until there was little else left. No meals could comfort her. No small talks or jokes could bandage the gaping hole. We were at fault. So, I drove out to the facility with Fran with me. There was no Bible barrier in her hand. It was just the rawness of her realization of wrongs. Fran was scared, and she should be because she had to face this head-on and pray for forgiveness. But there was hope for us. I felt it. We just needed to jump over this hurdle with Dr. Babin's help.



Shit, months had passed, and we hadn't seen hide nor tail of Ms. Moon. I was starting to believe that she had gotten the picture, that she had gained some sense, but then I saw her enter the building on my way to the break room. Patrice even looked like she had seen a ghost. Summer, ever the ray of sunlight, cheerfully greeted them. But, unfortunately, the woman looked morose, and her Bible was absent. I nearly squeaked out, "wow," but I contained it at the last minute. I stood outside the break room and stared. It was unbelievable how calm the woman was. Matthew stumbled up from behind me, the break room's door against his back, and he gawked at them, completely stunned.

"Someone want to tell me what the hell that is? Like who that is— because that ain't Frankie's grandma," he whispered.

"Shit if I know. I saw it just now like you. She doesn't have her Bible."

Matthew, ever the dramatic, fell to the floor.

"Get up fool, before they see us! Why did I have to be stuck with an idiot?"

"Because God favors babies and fools." Then he hopped up like a jack in the box or a very clumsy blind cat.

"Good God, you're so stupid get in the damn break room before you draw attention."

Sadly it was too late. Mr. Moon and his sister walked up to us. I had Matthew in a chokehold, and he was clinging to my waist.

"Hello Cassandra, Matthew," he chuckled.

"Ah, yes, Hello Mr. Moon, Ms. Moon. It's nice to see you again." I said and dropped my hold on my brother.

"Ah? Hi?" Matthew said with a crooked smile.

“I know you’re not very happy to see me. I’ve caused a lot of problems, but I’m sorry. I wanted to say I’m sorry for my behavior, and sorry for whatever harm I did to your patients.”

Ms. Moon said in a soft, sad voice. I think Matthew may have shit himself. I just knew hell had frozen over. And from the looks of it, Mr. Moon was amused by our faces. So, yup, we ultimately failed at professionalism.

“I’m sorry, please forgive my brother and me. I was little started, but we are very appreciative of the apology; all is forgiven.

Mr. Moon outright laughed at our antics, and Ms. Moon was flushed red with embarrassment, but she smiled too. It was a genuine smile, pretty, and so much like Frankie’s, it surprised me. Maybe, it was because I hadn’t seen any resemblance until now. Then, of course, I saw it with her brother, their smiles were crooked similarly, but now I saw how much more they were related; it was almost like a mirror.

“You realized just how much Frankie looks like her, didn’t you?” Mr. Moon asked.

“Ah, yeah. It uncanny. I know twins, but your genes are strong.”

“Honey, they were mirror images of us as children. Their hair was just a little more of a dirtier red than ours. You and your brother may be opposite in color, but you have the same features.” Ms. Moon said and then pointed at us.

“Like night and day. Unique for twins. I mean, even for fraternal twins. “

“Yeah, we get that a lot,” Matthew interjected.

“Well excuse us we have meeting with Dr. Babin. Y’all have a good day.”

“You do the same,” Matthew and I chorused.

They walked away, and I think I stared after them until they disappeared behind a closed door. I didn’t know what to think, but I was praying that whatever had happened with Ms. Moon

was permanent. God knows Frankie needed all the support. I already wanted to wrap her in bubble wrap, and I didn't think I could witness her shattered by any falsities.



We entered Dr. Babin's office. We had scheduled a meeting with her a few days in advance. She was happy to hear that there had been glad about Fran's change of heart. The woman was all professional. She wasn't flushed. So, I assumed that was from anger last time. Dr. Babin's hair was loose and was such a bright red, almost orange. She dressed in an emerald green dress under her white lab coat.

"Hello, please have a seat. I'm so glad that we agreed to meet. I've had a few breakthroughs with our little Frankie, and I wanted to share this with both of you badly. And so glad that you want to have a chat about counseling."

"Yes, Fran and I agreed that we have some hurdles we need help jumping over. But, I don't think we grieved enough."

"I need your help Dr. Babin. I hurt Frankie the most. I said so many nasty things, and I made her do this. I made her like this." Fran cried.

"I don't think that you're entirely responsible for Frankie's actions. But, ultimately, we are accountable for our actions." Dr. Babin explained. "However, we have to address why. Why this happened, the stressors. Then your family can heal. I would much rather see that than this to continue to fracture your relationship. Let's begin with you, Ms. Moon, and your brother; then we can see how we can incorporate or reintroduce Frankie into this."



The tea shop became my home away from home. I avoided the bakery and Dr. Warner's office like the plague. I was happy to get the hell away. I roamed the streets, sat, and ate in cafes when I was hungry. I snuck in and out of the house through the fire escape. I slept some days under the trees in the park in the sunlight regardless of the cold. I watched the leaves sway in the breeze, and I was happier away. I had tea with Levi, who told me stories about every little thing about the veil. I knew that death wasn't an end. My mama told me so. And now, when I saw her face, it was less painful. I dreamed of them often. They called out for me to see them soon that they were waiting. I saw August beckoned with gangly arms and his broad smile. God, I missed them. I had to wait, though, because I was still trying to figure out who Frankie Marchand was and what she could be if I ignored my Grandma Fran. Matthew and Cassandra would curl under my coat as we rested in the sunlight. Well, What little sunlight they had in November. But New Orleans was inconsistent, and the weather switched between hot and cold.

Is this Frankie? Is this the Frankie you want to show? Levi asked.

"I'm not sure, but I feel free. I could do anything right now. I don't have to listen to them if I don't want to."

Is that what you want, Frankie? I thought you wanted to be a part of the veil, like me, like your family. Can't you see them in the veil? They would be ever so pleased if you joined us. Fox whispered.

"I'm not ready yet, but I will be soon. Soon, I'll come to you." I told him. I have some things that I want to do. I have to get everything in order. I have to live this moment now, and I'll be with my family soon. Do you see me? I don't see me yet."

The sky darkened, and I carried Matthew in the inside pocket of my jacket as I walked home from the park. He couldn't fit the whole way, so he was situated there and in the collar. We shared my hoodie, his soft white fur on my cheek.

It's cold, Frankie; we are sleeping in your bed tonight, Matthew asked.

"Yeah, we're going home. I'm tired. I let you sleep under the covers too," I promised.

Do you promise?

"I promise, Matthew and I'll even stay for breakfast. Uncle Auggie will cook for us. Let's sleep first though." I yawned.

Ok, I'll let you sleep. We need the cuddles cause it is so cold. Matthew trilled.

Sluggishly, I climbed the fire escape. I let Matthew in before I dragged myself through the window. I was so tired. I hadn't taken much of the medicine this week, nor had I slept more than a few hours here and there. I was tired. So tired that I wasn't as quiet as I needed to be, and I knew I drew attention. But I couldn't care. I pulled myself up from my knees and stumbled to my room.

"Come, come, come. Psst. Psst, kitty come here," I called from the bed. I lifted the cover and crawled underneath. Matthew jumped up and tucked himself underneath my chin.

"Night. Night, Matthew."

Sweet dreams, Frankie, he trilled.

The following day, I woke to a hand on my forehead. It was cold, and it felt so good against my head.

"Frankie, Kiddo, you have a fever. You need to stay in bed. I'll get you something for it. Can you eat?"

"No, so tired. My head hurts."

“I’ll get you some Tylenol. Do you want some tea?” My uncle asked.

“No, water. Please,” I coughed.

“We’ll fix you up, Frankie.”

“Yeah, fix Frankie,” I mumbled before sleep took over me.

Blades and Cuts

Chapter 10

There were small minor scratches that I covered under long sleeves and jeans. Thin short lines in several little rows, all made with the razor blade I took out of Uncle Auggie's bathroom. It stung when I washed them with soap. It stung even more with rubbing alcohol on a cotton swab. I hadn't done this in a long time, but my skin itched, and I couldn't control my urges. I needed this. I was sitting in the tub. The water was hot, where my skin turned pink and tingled, but I still sat down, and I forced myself to endure it until I acclimated. I held the razor above my thigh where the scar from the car accident lay. The scar was rough and jagged. It had keloid badly, even under the care of doctors. I remember how it hurt and got infected with greenish pus because I couldn't stop myself from jabbing it now and then to prove it was real. I hated myself. I hated that I survived, and there were only these marks left. I could open the scar, but it would bleed too much.

In the tub, I sliced one short line in one of the creases of my knee. Then, I pressed the blade a little deeper on the next crease. The blood splashed into the tub and spread out into wispy webs as it seemed to be pulled under the water's surface. Next, I pressed the blade in the creases of my other knee, notching the lines in precisely the same place. I watched the blood disperse again under the surface. The water turned a color, my knees stung, but I felt relief in the pain. I let the razor fall onto the bath rug and leaned back into the tub, submerging completely. Again, the water made the cuts sting. I stayed under the surface until my lungs burned, then I did everything over again, submerged until I couldn't breathe. When I was fuzzy and gasping for air, I lay there for a few minutes more before I got out.

Frankie, are you crossing the veil? Are you going to join me? Do you want to see your family? You could be with them. One slash on each wrist thicker than your knees, Do you want me to help? I can help. He whispered in my head, his voice soothing.

“No Fox, Levi where are you? Are you with me still?”

Oh, Frankie. Once upon a time, Rougarou ran the woods here and there and called into the night for a friend. Once upon a time, a Rougarou loved a girl who wasn't a girl. Once upon a time, a fox sat across from a girl who smelled of cake and dough. He asked her to join him in the veil for a dance. Will you come and dance with me? Will you, Frankie?

“Not tonight. I need to sleep. Will you let me sleep? I can't think straight right now. Where are you? How are you here?”

I'm in your mind, Frankie. I'm a fox, remember. It's all a bit of juju, he whispered.

“It's all juju with you. Good night fox, let Levi out.”

Maybe, maybe not. Will you come if I do?”

“No, Fox. Not tonight. I don't think I'm really here.”

And maybe you are. How would you know?

“Good night. Don't make me say goodbye.”

Good night, never goodbye. Lovely, Frankie, he whispered, and then the buzzing was gone.



“I am responsible for a lot of Frankie's suffering; you don't have to assuage my guilt. I'm not proud of what I've done. But, while I may seek Frankie's forgiveness, I won't blame her if she doesn't give it. I have genuinely been cruel. And I have hated this child since my daughter's death. I can't even explain to you why.”

Silence filled the room after Fran spoke. I think she knocked the wind out of my lungs when she said she hated her for the last two, no it would be three years since their deaths. How was this possible? How wasn't I aware. My heart broke. I never expected her to say it out loud. I believed she had hatred for the situation, but not Frankie. Somehow, I knew I wasn't as dumbfounded because the words settled deep in the pit of my stomach—a rock in my gut that made me want to drink, to ease the ache. I just waited for the other shoe to drop, there was more, and I knew it.

“I wanted them to exchange places, not only was she there instead of Colette, she had wedged herself between us.” Fran said and gestured between us.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Fran? Were you jealous of your grandchild? I was trying to protect her from all the bullshit you spouted. Instead, you made her take a place between us. YOU! You had the girl walking on eggshells for two goddamn years. I don't believe this. We're twins in the same damn house. More than thirty years in the same place together. And, you lashed out at that child. I feel sick.”

My face and neck felt hot, and I pulled at my collar. I felt like I would throw up.

“Mr. Moon, calm down.” Dr. Babin pleaded as she unbuttoned the collar of my shirt and fanned a piece of paper over my face. “You've worked yourself up. Mr. Moon, this is a mild panic attack. Just take slow deep breaths. Slow deep breaths, inhale one two three. Exhale one two three. Again, inhale one... two... three... Out, one... two... three... How do you feel?”

Panic attacks felt like what Ida Mae had explained her heart attack felt. It felt like I was being squeezed inside and out at the very same time. I breathed in shuttering breaths. God, if this was what Frankie felt, I could only imagine her fear. I hated the lack of control. It was like being hit by a truck. But, hell, no, this shit was for the birds. Fran was crying again, she sat in her chair,

not knowing what to do, and honestly, I wasn't up for her touching me. Her words left a slimy feeling.

"Mr. Moon, I need to know if you can hear me."

"Y-yes," I said.



Matthew and I were sitting in the break room sharing a tub of chicken salad with crackers when Patrice walked in.

"Now, I know that you saw Frankie's family. The woman was completely different. Y'all, she apologized. I nearly pissed myself, and I couldn't even say anything. I, in real life, was speechless; it scared my husband."

"Oh, don't we know. I nearly fainted when I saw her."

"No, you idiot. You threw yourself down. I swear I wonder where you come from and how did I get stuck with you?"

"Why are you questioning God, fool! WE SHARED THE WOMB! THE WOMB, CASSANDRA!"

"Shut up, fool. You're being too loud. Ms. Moon apologized to us too. I won't say that it didn't shock me, but I appreciate her change of heart. I'm hoping that she'll learn from this. I knew from the start that she was responsible for Frankie's pain. The child spills bits and pieces in when she hallucinates. She even concerns fox, and God help me, that fool is vicious and uncaring, always has been. And for him to react, it's something serious."

"Is that so, Cassandra? Uncaring, you believe me uncaring. I thought I cared too much since I protected Levi from his father." He said coolly from the door. He walked into the room and sat at our table.

“I said it, and I mean what I say. You saved Levi once, and then you’ve caused trouble every time you’ve surfaced. How could I not think of you as vicious and uncaring?”

“I care. I care for myself. I’m no different from you, any of you. Am I?”

“If that’s what you believe than your more warped than I thought. I know you care very little for others. You’re selfish and you always have ulterior moment. Isn’t that right, Fox? Remember Fox, I know you. Where’s Levi? I’ll be seeing him soon. You know that don’t you?”

“If you say so, my dear. If you say so,” Fox said and walked out of the break room.



I don’t know how long I slept, but I ached all over. I felt around the bed blindly for Matthew; he was gone from the bed. He must have followed Uncle Auggie for food. I tried to open my eyes, but they felt heavy, and the light that passed over my eyelids was bright. I knew that opening my eyes was stupid, but I still tried to pull the thin lids apart with a blink. The opened window blinds let in harsh glaring light. My hands went to my temples, pressing in, while I squinched my eyes closed.

“You’re up, good. Now, you’re going to get your ass out of that bed. I know you haven’t been to work in nearly three weeks. They called to see if you were ok. I ought to hurt you, girl. You make me sick. GET UP!”

I tried to pull myself up, but I couldn’t, and my limbs felt sluggish and heavy. Finally, Grandma Fran snatched me up by the collar of my hoodie, annoyed.

“GET UP!”

“I’m trying.”

“Why did you have to live? I wish it were Colette here not you. I hate you. Do you hear me? I hate you!” Grandma Fran whispered in my ear like it was a secret, like a game of telephone, but she didn’t twist the word. Instead, it was loud and clear.

“I do too. Then I wouldn’t have to be here with you. I could be with my family. You’re not my family. Family doesn’t spit in your face. I would have died, but you wouldn’t let me. Why care then?”

“You don’t deserve to be with them.”

“And apparently, I don’t belong here. So I’ll make a choice. No, tell me what you want, grandma. Just say the words.”

“I wish you were dead, and I hope you rot—your soul is evil. You’re mind’s corrupt and I hate you!”

“This time, let me die.” I said and pulled the razor blade from my nightstand. The blade cut into my finger from how hard I pinched the razor between my fingers, and I watched Grandma Fran back away, her face riddled with several emotions, and then she stumbled into the Chesser drawer. I pressed the blade deep into my right wrist first and then the left. It hurt, but nothing compared to the sharpness of her words. I had loved this woman, and once upon a time, like grandma’s in fairytales, she loved me too.

She screamed.

“Let me die, please,” I begged her. I wanted it all to end. “Mama. Daddy. August. I want to come home.”

Death is not the end; we become the invisible. The body returns to the soil, and we roam again in the veil. Frankie, can you hear me?

“Let me die, please?” I asked. “It didn’t sound like I said it right, was it right? Who cares—”

A Price for Insanity

Chapter 11

Sunken, the mind slips under, and the cold seeps in, and all I felt was something closer to release than any thin cut could bring. A fog covers every corner of my mind, and the loop of repeated thoughts at every waken moment slid like soft sand through my fingertips. I felt how I slowed, and the sounds faded to a low buzz, and I sunk deeper. I wasn't fighting this time; I let whatever this was pull me deeper and deeper towards whatever awaited me at the bottom. Was this freeing? I didn't know, but there was some burning hope deep inside my chest that said, "Maybe," and so I went. It told me to sleep. I tried to be obedient for Grandma Fran, for Uncle Auggie, and when mama and daddy were alive, I was for them. So, I slept.

"CLEAR!" A voice screamed, and a jolt of something painful shot through the fog and seemed to lift me. "No, I don't want to, please," I thought.

"AGAIN, CLEAR!"

"Why? Why now?" I gasped, and my eyes opened, unseeing and tearful. "Why?"

"We've got her! Let's get her aboard the bus."

I was strapped down and moved; I saw the ceiling and blurry faces move in and out of focus. I felt more tears.

"Excuse me, Sir. We need to get her on the bus. We're heading to University Hospital. I need you to follow."

"GET THIS BUS MOVING! SHE'S CRASHING!"

"Please. Please. Please, let me die."

“Frankie.” Uncle Auggie called. I struggled to move. I couldn’t speak; something held me down. I struggled to free myself. The bed shook underneath. Uncle Auggie’s calloused hand pushed at my shoulder.

“Frankie stop! Frankie! STOP!” Uncle Auggie yelled.

“I want out. Help.” I tried and failed to say.

“Frankie calm down. You’re ok. You’re ok. Stop moving you’re hurting yourself.”

A monitor blared an annoying alarm. A nurse rushed in, reset the monitor, and assessed the damage in a very clinical way.

“Frankie, I’m Nurse Atkins. Do you know where you are?” I didn’t respond. “That’s ok. You’re in the hospital. We have you strapped down so you can’t hurt yourself. I’m going to examine your wrist,” She spoke in a calm, measured way.

Nurse Atkins unraveled the bandages and murmured something about a stitch pop. “I’ll have to call someone into fix this.”

She left the room quickly, and I remembered shutting down.

I woke up next to voices.

“This is Frankie’s second suicide attempt, Mr. Moon. This time she died for three minutes before being resuscitated. Let’s consider an inpatient care facility now. I need to ensure that Frankie has round the clock care in a stable and safe environment.”

“What does that mean? Frankie’s safe with me. We’re her family.”

“Sir, no offense, but Frankie was able to overdose on old pain killers and now has slashed both wrists. The facility’s environment is stable, with less access to restricted items such as sharp razors and medication. We need to offer Frankie a more controlled environment, which would lessen the stress on Frankie and you and your sister.”

They talked over my head like I wasn't there. Again, I wanted to die, and again I failed. What did they want from me? Well, I had nothing left to give. I wanted none of this. It was cruel. Grandma Fran said she wished it was me, but she had no idea how much I agreed. Grandma said that my soul was evil. What was more cleansing than death? The thoughts had slipped through my fingers, and now they roared as if angrier because I tried to silence them. They bounced around, and they turned into voices.

Come on, Frankie, if you can't die, then let's climb deep inside. Can you see it, Frankie? Your mama and daddy are in your memories, August too. Step inside Frankie. Do you see?

I closed my eyes, and I saw the warm stretch of grass—August, with his camera snapping still life photos of a vase of flowers against tree bark. So, I stepped in, and a red fox and his cat friends followed behind, one white and the other black.

Come, Frankie, They beckoned.

I walked further into the grass, the sun shining above, mild and pleasant weather. Then, finally, I sat beneath the old oak tree, a fuzzy body climbed into my lap, and the shutters on August's camera clicked. "I'll stay here," I thought. "Just for a little while."



Fox stormed out of that break room, and I felt nothing. No regrets, he wasn't of importance, and whatever tantrums he had, I was ready and waiting.

"You know, you started something, right?" Matthew asked from the table. He closed the chicken salad container.

"Yes, and I'll finish it." I said and walked out of the break room to Frankie's room.

He was there. Fox sat next to Frankie's bed and whispered something near her ear. Something he knew was too low for me to catch. Frankie looked into his eyes with such a stern look it surprised me.

"Fox, where's Levi? Let Levi out." She said authoritatively.

"I can't do that."

"You can't or you won't?" I asked from the doorway.

"I WONT!" He growled.

"But you will," I said.

"Bad foxie, let Levi out." Frankie said and smacked Fox's hand.

Fox jumped up and sprinted past me, checking my shoulder as he moved out. His feet were thunderous. I hadn't cared one bit, and I was going to show how little too.

"Fox, not all bad. He restless. No friends. Like me." Frankie yawned and then turned over to nap.

I closed the blinds and drew the curtain before I left the room. Frankie had placed something heavy on my mind. Fox was always bad; evil was a better description. Wasn't he? Was that all to Fox? I needed to think.



"Does Frankie know? Does Frankie know that you hate her, Fran?" I asked as I pulled myself together.

Dr. Babin looked between the two of us, but she kept respectably quiet. I looked at Fran and how her lip trembled and how she twisted those pieces of Kleenex into tight twists until they tore.

"When?" I croaked. My voice was tight.

“Right before...”

“Right before what, Fran? SAY IT!”

“WHEN SHE SLIT HER WRIST! I told her then and she pulled the razor from the nightstand. She said ok, but this time let her die.”

My hand whizzed out before me, and a resounding CRACK filled the room. The room was silent again, and I shook. I stared at my hands and the red mark of my handprint against Fran’s face.

“Oh, GOD! OH MY GOD! FRAN WHY?” I screamed, and the weight of those words made me crumble.

“Dr. Babin, I didn’t mean it. I swear,” Fran babbled. “Auggie? AUGGIE PLEASE?”

I closed my eyes and pulled the hearing aids from my ears, and I wept.



Daddy told me that everything has a price. But, of course, daddy wasn’t talking about money, but he was talking about the check and balance that we all followed in life. He taught me that we paid the price for our actions and needed to, so the world worked right. Mama called it my daddy’s simplified version of Karma. I never thought it was very simplified at all. Nothing was ever as simple as we thought, even when the razor cut through the arteries. I remembered thinking that it would be easy to die, and I was wrong. Two attempts resulted in more pain. Where were the checks and balances then? I paid, I paid in losses, and I paid in flesh and blood. But it wasn’t enough to die, and it wasn’t sufficient to please Grandma Fran’s animosity because she wanted me dead but kept me alive.

I was the only survivor out of all the people in that wreck two years ago. The driver who caused the accident even got to die, but not me. My blood and flesh left on the side of the

interstate weren't able to balance the scales. My portion weighed less. I gave a pound, but my pound outweighed by the ton of scrap metal. When my mind shattered to pieces, I paid again, and I hid under the carefully constructed mask, all fractured smiling faces.

And so, I took a break in the recesses of my memories walled behind roots and branches of oak trees. Only for a while, the price for sanity is too high, but I can afford insanity.

We all can afford crazy it's given freely. Didn't you know Frankie? Wasn't it obvious? He snarked.

“FUCK YOU! EVEN THAT WASN'T FREE FOR ME!” I yelled.

Oh really, are you sure? I don't think anyone wants to be crazy? Did you pay, Frankie? With what? What could crazy cost?

“MY SANITY, YOU ASSHOLE! It cost me my parents, my brother, and My Grandma Fran. It cost me everything because we were coming home from Dr. Warner's office. I needed fucking pills. It was my fault.”

Sounds pretty cheap to me, the voice laughed.

“FUCK YOU! YOU KNOW NOTHING! YOU MEAN NOTHING!” I screamed, and I was pulled under and pushed forward.

My heart thundered, and something ripped my breath and voice out of my throat, and I fell. I fell past the roots, out of clinging branches, past the dancing Fox and kitties, and out of August's gangly arms. I fell; my mind, body, and soul like separated layers of fabric fell together. Then, gathered and layered and held together by sewing thread, I woke up.

We All Have to Face the Word

Chapter 12

There were no words to explain the ache I felt after I heard Fran. There was nothing to ease the hurt or the cruelty in her actions. So we left behind Frankie again. Months and months as an inpatient, I left her with strangers that cared for her better than I could. We rode the entire way home in purposeful silence; my hearing aids tucked in the pocket of my shirt. I had assumed that Frankie's suicide attempt resulted from lingering grief for Colette, Thomas, and August. I hadn't realized that Fran condemned Frankie, that the woman had shackled her with hate and contempt formed by ignorance so inconceivable. I saw the ignorance and the arrogance demonstrated with those hateful church ladies, and that devilish preacher worsened the situation. They humiliated her in front of people. The size of the group of people wasn't significant; it was the idea that Fran discussed Frankie publicly. I knew Ida Mae had lost her rocker ages ago and was the queen of mess, but Fran had taken the cake. However, I had no right to slap Fran, but I couldn't apologize just yet. I wasn't able to look at her.

We pulled up to the house; I put the truck into park but kept the motor running. Fran grabbed my hand.

"Please, Auggie, let me explain. You don't have to say anything, and you don't have to believe me, but could you listen. Put your hearing aids in, please," she asked in sign.

I rubbed my hand down my face before pulling out my hearing aids.

"There. There in. Say what you got to say."

"You asked how I could forgive Joe and not Frankie—I never forgave Joe. You thought it was a little crush because he was a few years older than us, but it wasn't by much, and you should know because Miriam was two years younger, and she's been running after you since

then. Joe was my first everything. I loved him, and he loved me. He was going to marry me when he returned from war, but the Joe I knew and the Joe that returned from Vietnam were not the same. I couldn't reach him. No one could. He had that same glassy-eyed look that Frankie had."

"So what?"

"I found him. I found Joe. I was there when he pulled the trigger. I saw my Joe for the shortest moments, and how his lips curled upwards and those dimples sat deep in his cheeks, but it all ended with a BANG. His mama and I were so close to him, and then we weren't because neither of us could get to him before he pulled the trigger." Fran paused and rubbed at her face.

"I saw him in Frankie. I hated myself for so long that it was easier to lash out at her, to hate her. She was falling at the seams, and I couldn't do that. I never could. I was thrown cards I had to play with, and she wouldn't hold up her hand. I twisted it August. When she asked me what I wanted, I told her I hated her and wished she was dead. I was angry about the bakery and her sneaking in and out. Then I hated again that there wasn't a way for me stop them from dying in that wreck, and everything I loved just rotted from inside out. I didn't expect she would follow through. I wanted her to hurt because I hurt. I wanted her to fester in grief like me."

"And you wanted to die, Fran. But you couldn't do it. You wanted her to hurt and she just wanted you to love her even as she obeyed your wishes. She did it because she loved you. Get the hell out of my truck. I can't see your face Fran. At least not now."

I threw the truck into reverse, backed out, and clipped the mailbox in the process. Then, I drove the interstate and got off at St. Charles. When I pulled up to the bakery, I texted Miriam.

Miriam flew out of the bakery's back door and was in my arms before I could even say anything. I cried in her neck, and I didn't know what the hell I was able to say as the hurt choked

me. I was a grown man, and I was crying like a babe. This short little woman held me with a power I hadn't felt since Mama Tess. She squeezed at all the places that felt weak, and I wept.

“August Moon, let me drive you to my house. Come on, let me get you home. We can talk. Do whatever you need. You can't drive like this. I ain't gonna let you. So shove over.”

Miriam shoved me over and sat in the driver's seat.

“Frankie, forgive me.” I cried.



I felt uneasy after I talked with Frankie. I felt like I was missing something, and though I knew Fox longer than her, Frankie seemed aware of something that I wasn't, which irritated me. Not because she was conscious, but that I wasn't. Nothing was making sense to me, so I made a phone call on my break. I stood outside the facility near my jeep.

“Grandma, do you remember Fox?”

“Cassandra, baby, what's wrong. Is Levi ok?”

“He's been gone, and Fox is here. I'm trying to understand something. One of my patients said something that has me puzzled.”

“Sounds like it. So what did this patient say?”

“I had words with Fox, we don't like each other and he's taken a shine to Frankie. Frankie's under our care. Well, She said that Fox isn't all bad, just restless and lonely, I guess. I just don't see how she can say that.”

“Cassandra, do you remember when Fox showed up? Where he came to?”

“Yeah, he came to our house for me and Matthew.”

“Exactly, Fox isn't so separated from Levi that he exists alone. He's a part of Levi. Fox's the part Levi wasn't brave enough to reach because it was closed off to him, and his mind

fractured when he was near death. I've told you that Levi could have died that night. "She huffed like it hurt to think of that night or like it was fresh pain. "Like Peter Parker and Spiderman. They are one but alter egos. Don't you see—you love Levi and hate Fox, but they're one. "

"So, I'm the problem."

"I wouldn't say you're the problem; you couldn't see past how Fox takes over Levi because you loved what you knew. People aren't one-dimensional. Think Cassandra. See past what you've been taught in those books and look past your prejudices. Fox came to you and Matthew, and you turned him away. How would you feel Cassandra?"

"Angry. I would feel angry, Grandma."

"What else? You've compared him to a toddler. Those tantrums are not just anger; it's hurt and betrayal. Fox, may seem like a bastard, but he's the emotions that Levi can't express on his own. Think about that, Cassandra."

"I have to go. I'll call you back."

"Ok, and tell Matthew to call me too. Good luck!"



Where the hell was I? The room was dark. I pulled myself up and looked around, trying to figure out where I was, and in the darkness, I noticed someone sitting in the chair near me.

"Hello Frankie, did you sleep well?"

"Who are you... Fox?"

"You still remember me, even though you weren't really here?"

"You've been whispering in my ear. I don't think I could forget you if I wanted. Click the light. I want to see your face."

"Why? Don't you want to see Levi?"

“Don’t you know that I know your secret? Come. Turn the light on.”

The man stood tall at over six feet. He sauntered in a slouch that I knew he exaggerated on purpose. He clicked the light, and I saw his copper face and wheat yellow eyes. His locs lacked shells and string.

“Come here.” I beckoned him with a wave of my hand, and it drew my attention to the scars on my left hand and fingers.

Fox grabbed my hands and settled them in his palms.

“I did that?”

“Yes. We all scar in different ways.”

“Yeah, we do,” I said and traced the scar on his eyebrow. “We’re scarred inside and outside aren’t we? Which name do you want me to call you?”

“Whatever, you like?”

“I’ll call you friend, my only friend,” I whispered.

My friend kissed my hands, and I said nothing when his tears dampened my hands. Why would I?

Vita

Leah Elizabeth Robinson is a two-time graduate of Southern University at New Orleans, where she earned a B.A. in English in 2010 and a B.A. in History in 2014. She has been a substitute teacher of a New Orleans Charter high school while continuing to pursue higher education.

Contact Information : leaheliz_robinson@yahoo.com