

A Black Deeper Than Death
(Miki Radicci Book 1)
M.E. Purfield

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This is a work of pure fiction

For Mom. The series she has been bugging me for.

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NOT QUITE SO NUMB

The bouncer shoves me out of the Frog Bar. I stumble down the concrete steps, pass the people waiting in line, and fall to the sidewalk. Although I land on my hands, I still hit my head. But with the three vodkas and cranberry juice from the bar mixed with my black market Lexapro and Xanax chaser, I don't feel a thing.

“Don’t let me catch you in here again,” the fat bald-headed bouncer in a bad wool pullover says. “Crazy bitch.” He walks back inside, rubbing his aching nuts that I kicked.

I remain on the ground and inhale a few icy breaths. I slide my arms under my numb head and listen to the people talking. At first I’m pissed that I’m not going to be able to see the rest of Blonde Redhead’s set inside, but I’m also glad to be away from that Guido Jersey Shore wannabe who thought I was going to blow him in the corner of the room. I mean really, what is a wife-beater wearing, tan-skinned, Jersey-accented asshole doing in a place like the Frog Bar?

“Baby, you okay?” some guy asks.

I roll over on my back and glare at the bohemian with a brown leather jacket, jeans, and...earmuffs? His twiggy girlfriend poses next to him and checks me out like I’m some kind of mutant that crawled out of the Hudson. I might as well be compared to her fur jacket and skin-tight black dress. I bet she’s not even wearing underwear.

“Don’t I look okay?” I ask. “What’s wrong, never seen anyone lay on the freakin’ sidewalk? Fucking New York City, asshole. People all over laying on the sidewalk.”

The guy holds his hands up and smiles. “Okay. Okay.”

The fur coat bimbo laces her arms around his waist like he’s some kind of prize. Yeah, a prize that wears sandals in the winter? “C’mon. She’s probably some teenage, runaway hooker or something.” She pulls him away.

“Doesn’t mean she don’t need some help,” he says.

I sit up and mutter, “Runaway hooker my ass.” Do I look like a hooker in black pants, purple sweater, and my \$900 leather jacket, bitch? If they knew who I really am they would probably be sucking my ass. Just as well, I’m so not in the mood for an ass-sucking.

Two agonizing minutes later, I stand and join the rest of the downtown nightlife. Some people glare my way, most just ignore. When you get down to it, having someone thrown to the sidewalk is not that unusual.

I check the time on my cell phone: 10:13 PM. Do I hit up another bar? Or should I go home?

“Fuck,” I whisper. I pull my wallet out of my back pocket to make sure that the bartender gave back my fake I.D. It’s there. Going to another bar sounds like the next best move.

I zipper up my jacket and stick my hands in my pockets as I walk Hudson Street. I curse myself for leaving my hat at home. The breeze funneling between the buildings windburns my ears and makes my nose drip.

I continue down the streets and wonder if I should call Corey to see if he wants to hang out. Then, through my alcohol and chemical haze, I remember he has a date tonight with some rent boy he met in the Lower East Side. I so hate drinking alone, but I also hate crowds.

Feeling dizzy, I stop for a moment on the dark street. Where the hell am I? The huge buildings look like warehouses, but since the windows aren’t boarded up to hide what’s inside, they could be converted condos. I don’t make out any storefronts or entrances to the buildings, just loading ramps, steel shutter gates, and skinny metal stairs. I must be way off course since cobblestone has replaced the asphalt. The average person should freak out a little, but I have my butterfly knife with me if some freak gives me trouble. I

spot cars driving down the cross street ahead and decide to continue on. Where there's traffic there're bars, right?

I walk to the edge of the sidewalk to avoid the dark alley on my right. Last thing I need...

...the hand releases my hair...the knife slashes my face...and again...I scream and cover my stinging face only to have the knife serrate the back of my hands....stumble to my feet and lean against the brick wall of the alley...."Stop please stop," I cry....the dark figure in a short dark coat and derby hat stands over me....knife in their hand....large dripping blade..."Little whore thinks she can do better," the figure rasps...."Help me," I scream....look down the alley and see no one coming...cold steel punctures my stomach.... Blood fills my mouth...liquid warmth down my neck...the blade penetrates...and again...the pain fades...and again...hot breath gasps in my face...and again...until all turns a deep black....

END OF A SHIFT

"Miss, can you hear me?"

I open my eyes to see a cop and a woman standing over me. The name pinned to his shirt reads Ricco. The cop is young and kind of cute. He has one of those square-jaw faces that look like it will only stay cute with a crew cut. I wonder if that's why he chose to be a cop. The woman is older with way too much makeup. She must have slathered on the pink eye shadow all the way up to her forehead with a paintbrush. Catching an odor of onions and shit off the breeze, I'd say she's homeless. But her short black wool overcoat appears new, so you never know.

"I can hear you," I say. "What happened?"

"I was crossing the street when I heard you screaming for help." Crazy make-up lady leans over me and hugs her huge handbag as if the contents are going to rain out. "When I found you, you were laying right here on the street. I pulled you over to the side so that no one would run you over." She smiles wide, revealing white bonded teeth.

I fake a smile back for her. "Thanks."

"Were you attacked, miss?" Ricco the cop asks. "Are you hurt?"

I suddenly remember what happened. I pat my face and stomach and find no wounds. "Holy Jesus," I sigh. I have never felt anything like that before in my sixteen years of life. I can still feel the cold knife slicing through my gut like a paper cut that sends a shiver down your spine.

"Right here I saw her." Crazy make-up lady snuffles. "I didn't touch her. No I didn't. See?"

"Are you hurt?" The cop sighs. The frustration of being with two crazy women finally getting to him, I suppose. "Do you need me to call you an ambulance?"

I sit up and face the dark alley. "No. I'm not hurt. But someone else is." I point to the darkness. "Someone was killed back there. A woman."

The crazy make-up lady's eyes widen while the cop's scrunch up with doubt.

I glare at him. "What?"

"Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

"I'm not playing with you and I am not drunk," I say.

Ricco the cop shakes his head in disbelief. He can probably smell my breath.

"Listen, okay," I say. "Please. I know what I saw."

Ricco helps me to my feet and I walk to the alley. He motions for the woman to hang back while he follows me inside. "Are you saying you saw a woman murdered?"

The streetlights barely penetrate the darkness in the alley.

"You got a light or something?"

He removes the huge flashlight off his belt and shines it down the alley. I lead him in deeper and scan the area. Garbage bags and cans line the graffiti enhanced brick walls and send a horrid stench up my nose. A few metal doors lead into the buildings.

"Listen, my shift is almost over," the cop says. "I'll be glad to help you if you need it, but I am not in the mood to be jerked around here. Were you or were you not attacked tonight?"

I turn to the jarhead cop. "I'm not jerking you around. For fuck sake I saw a woman murdered in this fucking alley."

He stops and shines the light to my side. His face creases. "Step back."

I give him room and he walks past. I can see what he's shining the light on: a foot in a green high heel shoe. I move up behind him and cover my mouth. Although she's laying facedown in a puddle of blood, I know it's the same woman from my vision.

"I said, step back," the cop's nervous voice says.

I obey him, never taking my eyes off the dead woman. Memories of the pain she felt when she died race through me, making me hug my shivering body.

A DELICATE BALANCE OF TRUTH AND LIES

I stand across the street from the alley and wait. Ricco the cop calls more of his co-workers in. Then the ambulance arrives, which is kind of a waste of time. The crazy make-up lady stands next to me and watches them section off the scene of the crime. I try to stand to her side so that the breeze doesn't blow her noxious smell my way, but wherever I move she follows. At least she doesn't talk to me. She just mutters about how terrible it is that the woman was murdered and what not.

Ricco walks back to us and takes out his notepad. He asks crazy make-up lady how she found me on the street. It's kind of weird hearing someone talk about you and what you did when you have no recollection of it. I guess this is what alcoholics go through when their families confront them after their binges. Crazy make-up lady recites the address for the YMCA on 23rd street, breaking down my homeless theory. When he finishes questioning her, the cop tells the crazy make-up lady to go home and that the investigating detectives will contact her if they have anymore questions. But she doesn't leave yet, too into the lights in the sky.

Now it's my turn. After I give him my basic info like name, age, phone number, and address, I start my story. I craft my words and avoid saying "I was stabbed in the stomach", which is exactly how it happened. Instead I say, "I saw the killer slice at her face and then stab her in the stomach until she died. Then I fainted, I guess."

Ricco raises one brow. He's trying to keep that cold indifferent cop expression, but his eyes are giving away his suspicion. I don't blame him. I would think I was lying too. But to tell him the truth would just drop me into a bigger hole.

When we finish up, he asks me to wait here for the detectives. I nod my head and sigh, "Yeah, sure." He walks off back to the scene. I notice the crazy make-up lady is gone and appreciate the cleaner air. By now there're a lot more people standing around watching the scene from the yellow crime scene ribbon barricade. Some people are even

taking pictures. I turn my back to the cameras and hope no one snapped a shot of my face. The last thing I need is Sharon ragging me about bad publicity before a show.

Two cigarettes later, one of those unmarked Sedans with a spinning red and blue light attached to the roof pulls up. Two guys in suits step out. One is a light skinned black man and in decent shape compared to his white partner who could afford to lose forty pounds and benefit from hair plugs. Ricco talks to the two men and then leads them down the alley. I assume after I repeat my story to the detectives I can go home and get some sleep. My alcohol deprived brain pounds against my skull and my eyes need toothpicks to keep them open. I so wish I could lie down on the sidewalk and close my eyes for a while.

The two suits walk out of the alley and stare right at me as they move closer. Their faces sculpt into non-emotion. They reveal their badges. The light skinned black guy says, "I'm Detective Otto Sampson and this is Detective Jerry Hersh."

"Hello," I say.

They nod and put their badges away. Sampson takes out a notepad and pen.

"Miss Michelina Radicci, right?" Hersh asks.

"Yeah, that's me. You can call me Miki if you want." I light up my third cigarette in the last hour to keep my hands warm.

"Had a rough night, Ms. Radicci?" Hersh asks.

I study his smirk and realize that Hersh is the asshole of the pair. "I've had better. Not as bad as that woman in there."

"We understand that you found the body?" Sampson says, his voice is clear, no trace of that annoying New York accent like Hersh's.

"Yeah. Yes."

"Can you tell us about that?"

I sigh and shake my head. Now I know why those actors on crime shows pretend to be pissed when talking to cops. It's kind of annoying telling the same story over and over.

"I was walking down the street here when I saw the woman get stabbed," I say.

"Show us where, exactly," Hersh says.

I walk them over to the curb just in front of the alley. "Here," I say.

The two cops look down the now illuminated alley, then back at me. "Go on," Sampson says.

"And I heard her scream and I saw the killer stab at her face. I think it was twice before she put her hands over it and he sliced her hands too. She fell to the ground, against the wall, and then the killer stabbed her in the stomach four times."

Sampson scribbles notes while Hersh glares at me like I raped his dog.

"Four times?" Hersh asks.

"Four times," I say.

"You're sure?"

"Um, yeah." Based upon the jerk's smile I wonder if I stepped into a trap.

"Let me get this straight. From here to the placement of the murder way at the back, you saw all that in a dark alley?" Hersh asks.

Stupidity washes over me. I nod and drag off my cigarette. "Yes," I whisper.

"Ms. Radicci, did you touch the body before the police officer found it?" Sampson asks.

"No. I was unconscious on the street."

The two detectives exchange expressions. Detective Sampson puts his notepad away and breaks out a pair of handcuffs.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” I ask.

“Ms. Radicci, you are being arrested for the suspicion of murder,” Hersh says.

Sampson swings me around and cuffs my hands behind my back. I look over my shoulder as Hersh reads me my rights and frown at the cameras flashing.

“What’s this?” Sampson asks.

He takes the butterfly knife out of my back pocket.

He smiles and says, “Looks like a murder weapon to me.”

I’m so screwed.

TIMELINES

After they enter my information at one of the desks, an officer escorts me into an interview room while the detectives check out my alibi. He helps me into a seat and opens one of the cuffs. I sigh in relief thinking that he’s going to free my other hand. But the cop just loops the three link chain around the back of the chair and recuffs my free hand, keeping my arms behind my back. When the cop finishes, he says, “Someone will be with you shortly,” like I should expect a waiter, and then he’s gone.

My head continues to pound, but at least the nausea is gone. I try to relax as best I can even though the temperature in the room is way into the 80s and I’m still wearing my leather jacket. I check out the taxpayer-funded design of the room. The drywall is painted off-white to match the only door. Another chair sits across the table, in front of the two-way mirror. I stretch my head over my shoulder and spot a few more chairs in case anyone has plans to put me through a gauntlet. I still can’t believe that I’m here in the police station for no reason. They can’t honestly believe I killed that woman. Then again, knowing exactly how she was killed and having a weapon on me doesn’t help.

The door opens and Detective Sampson enters. He closes it behind him and makes sure it locks. He places stuffed folders on the table and sits in the chair, his back to the two-way mirror.

“Can I leave now?” I ask.

“Not yet. We’re still waiting for a coroner’s report and checking out your alibi.”

“I didn’t do anything. This is so fucked.”

Sampson opens the files in front of him and studies the papers. I guess he doesn’t give a crap what I have to say.

“Did you call your parents yet, Ms. Radicci?” he asks.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Fat chance of that.”

“You’re a minor.” Sampson looks up. “They’re the only ones that can bail you out, no?”

“You guys didn’t do your homework yet?” I ask. “You don’t know who I am? I guess cops aren’t into the arts.”

Sampson smirks. “I know who you are, Michelina Radicci. You’re an art genius. Discovered at the age of four and selling paintings for thousands of dollars by the time you were five. I’ve been to a few of your shows here in the city. You’re very talented. Although, I prefer your lighter stuff lately. This surreal business is too heavy on my little cop brain.”

I laugh. Sampson flinches.

“Yeah, well, it’s common knowledge that I’m emancipated from my parents. Press had a rave over that one. Surprised you missed it.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah, don’t worry. My lawyer will bring you the paperwork when she gets here,” I say.

“Good.”

Silence fills the room. My body craves a cigarette but I doubt Sampson will give me one since there’re No Smoking signs all over the building.

“So who takes care of you?” Sampson asks.

“Is this part of the questioning?”

“No. Just curious. Sixteen year old girl taking care of herself in this city...” He shrugs.

“I take care of myself. I make more in one year than you do in ten,” I say. “I live with my grandfather. And a friend.”

“I can call him for you if you want.”

“My lawyer will call him.”

He nods and then focuses on the file. The door opens again and Detective Hersh walks in. “Did I miss anything? Did she tell you that she’s innocent?” He grabs a chair from against the wall.

“God, I’m stuck in some bad CSI episode,” I say. “What are you supposed to be, the stereotypical racist cop?”

Sampson smirks.

Hersh sits down next to his partner and flashes me a dirty look. “I suggest you only speak when spoken to, since you’re in such deep shit you’re gonna need a snorkel and goggles.”

“Whatever.” I sigh and lean back.

“We were just getting to know each other,” Sampson says.

“Yeah, Little Miss Art Celebrity,” Hersh says. “I guess it was only a matter of time before you filled in the stereotype. Rich Art Brat Goes Insane, news at eleven.”

I lean forward and wiggle my nose at him.

Hersh glances at Sampson then back to me. “What are you doing?”

“Since my hands are cuffed, I’m flipping you the finger with my nose.”

Hersh cracks his palm on the table. Even Sampson jumps back. He points a finger at me. His eyes flare. “I said, watch it.”

The door opens a third time, and the third time is the charm. My savior sashays in: Sharon May, my lawyer, business manager, and moral compass. Wearing one of her expensive gray suits with a skirt just above the knee to get attention from the average man, Sharon sweeps into the room and places her briefcase on the table. She lays her big blue eyes on me and opens her mouth in a gasp.

“Miki Miki Miki, what are these horrible behemoths doing to you?”

“I’m not sure, but I think the fat one is one step away from bitch slapping me.” I fake cry and snifle.

Hersh glares at Sharon, like any other asshole would. I know he wants to ask the question. He wants to know why Sharon, as beautiful as she appears - a smart, leggy blonde lawyer with total class - has an Adams apple as big as a golf ball? Well, duh. She’s a post-op transsexual.

“Who the hell are you?” Hersh asks. “And what the hell are you?”

Sharon stares down her nose at Hersh. “I am Miki’s lawyer, Sharon May.” She then slips on her bitch face. “What am I? The one lawyer you don’t want to fuck with.”

I grin at Hersh who looks like he wants to bash Sharon’s head in. Sampson, smart enough to sense his partner’s mood, places his hand on his Hersh’s arm and whispers, “Calm down.” Hersh pulls his arm away.

Sharon opens her briefcase and slaps a piece of paper on the desk. “Are any of you gentleman familiar with the preliminary report on the body of Katherine Moore?”

“Who?” I ask.

“The poor young lady they’re accusing you of murdering, sweetie.”

I nod.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I just received it before I got into the room,” Hersh says, showing his own folder.

Sharon frowns, showing sympathy for Hersh. “Oh, you poor thing. You must have had a hard life climbing the ranks to Detective when you can’t read English.”

“What are you talking about?” Sampson asks, grabbing the report from Hersh.

“As you can see,” Sharon says, “Although they need to do a full autopsy, the coroner at the scene clearly states that the time of death for poor Ms. Moore was between 9:30 and 10:00 PM this evening.”

“Okay?” Sampson says.

I shake my head, feeling sorry for Sampson.

“Did you check out my client’s alibi at the Frog Bar this evening?”

Sampson turns to Hersh who studies his hands.

“Yeah, we checked it out,” Hersh says. “She was there at around 8:30 and wasn’t kicked out until 10:15 and before that time she was engaged in a violent confrontation with a patron and a few bouncers.”

Sharon crosses her arms, glares at me, and shakes her head. “Really, Miki. That wasn’t very mature what you did to that poor man’s testicles.”

“Oh, my God. You know very well why I aim for them,” I snap back.

She turns back to the cops. “Therefore, I believe you have no grounds to hold my client and why isn’t someone taking those cuffs off her. Clearly she’s too young for your kinky sex games, Detective Hersh.”

“Wait a second,” Hersh says. “What about the fact that she has details of the victim’s wounds that coincide with the coroner’s prelim report while she claims that she did not touch the body or a weapon.”

“Let me guess, you think my client had previous knowledge and was in cahoots with the perpetrator. Then the murderer divulged the facts to her? Even the D.A. outside doesn’t believe my client would have enough time to get such detail before she fainted. Plus, why the hell would she even report the murder to the police if she was involved?”

Sampson lowers his head in the coroner’s report and says. “The comparison with the butterfly knife and the wounds doesn’t match.”

Hersh huffs and crosses his arms.

Sampson stands up and frees me from the chair.

“So I’m free to go?” I ask.

“As a bird,” Sharon says, packing away her file.

“Miki, wait,” Sampson says. “I’d still like to ask you some questions.”

“Why?” I ask.

“You know a lot about the details of the murder. I’d like to know how you know it.”

“Cause she’s guilty as hell,” Hersh mumbles.

I turn to Sharon. I would like to help, but I’m so not in the mood right now. Besides, the woman is dead and I don’t know much about the murder besides experiencing it, which is something I don’t want to get into with them.

“It’s up to you, sweetie. You just pay me. But I will be with you.”

“Listen,” I say to Sampson. “I’m tired. Can we do this another time?”

Sampson throws his hands up in defeat and Hersh exhales his aggravation as he stands and walks out of the room.

Sharon holds the door open for me. I glance at Sampson sitting at the table and flipping through the papers. He looks as beat as me and I can’t help but feel guilty about it.

THE MEN OUTSIDE

Sharon escorts me to the window to retrieve my confiscated possessions. The cop behind the window passes me an envelope filled with my personal items and a clipboard to sign. I open it and take out my wallet, cigarettes, Zippo lighter, a little cash, and my cell phone. I give the cop a dirty look and ask, “Where’s my knife?”

Sharon pulls her attention from her Blackberry and reviews the list of possessions.

The elderly cop tilts his head. “Did they arrest you with a knife?”

“Uh, yeah. A 5-inch butterfly. Perfectly legal in this state.” And the one my uncle gave me before he went to jail.

The cop checks out his copy of the list. “It’s not here.”

“Of course it’s not there.” I turn to Sharon. “The cop took it out of my pocket after he cuffed me.”

She frowns. “Then he probably logged it as evidence.”

“But I didn’t kill anyone. God, people are so stupid.”

“I know, sweetie. Just calm down. Once the medical examiner completes their report, we should be able to get it back.”

“Anything else?” the cop asks, looking at me as if I’m wasting his time.

“Fucking’ unbelievable.” I flip him the bird and stomp off. The cop calls after me, but I just give him my back.

Sharon walks at my side. “I know. I know. But that’s the system. I’ll look into it.” She slips her arm around my shoulder as we weave through the mixed crowd of cops, civil servants, and criminals. “Focus on the positive now. You don’t have to spend the night in jail and perform bowel movements in front of a group of desperate women.”

I nod and try to go along with her reasoning until I step into the downstairs lobby of the police station. To the naked eye it would appear that an old Italian man in brown pants and a worn, black wool overcoat is fighting with a fifteen year old, skinny Southern black boy in baggy jeans and a skintight, black denim jacket. But to the trained eye like mine, this is business as usual.

Grandpa Blaise shouts and waves his arms at Corey sitting on a bench. Corey shakes his head and plays bored; probably because he doesn’t understand a single word of Italian that Grandpa shouts. I cringe at the scene as embarrassment runs through my veins. Some stare at them either scared or worried that he will break out into violence. Others are

amused since Corey has his arms crossed with his head back and his mouth open, faking a horrible death. This is nothing compared to what I've seen them get into at home. This time though they're probably not fighting about Corey's homosexuality. I imagine Grandpa's been shitting a cow since Sharon informed him of my arrest. He probably thought another generation of Radiccis would build a rap sheet.

"Would you two shut up, or you're going to get thrown in jail," I approach them and open my pack of cigarettes.

"My sweet bambina," Grandpa Blaise takes me into his arms. I rest my head on his chest, press to his potbelly, and inhale his cologne. I smile, wondering why he had to put on cologne when Sharon probably woke him up in the middle of the night. "Did they hurt you, my Michelina?"

"No, I'm okay." I kiss his stubbly cheek and turn to Corey. He hugs me and I press to his skinny frame.

"This is so crazy," Corey says, showing off his thick Southern accent. "I don't know how they can think you would kill anyone."

"Weeeelllll..." says Grandpa Blaise.

I slap his shoulder and laugh. "I didn't and that is that. It's just a big old cop mistake or maybe they're trying to fill an arrest quota."

Sharon hugs me with one arm and kisses the top of my head. "I'll be in touch, sweet Miki," she says. "Don't forget we have to go over the details for this week's show."

I light up a cigarette and nod, "Got it. Thanks again, Sharon."

"Yeah, thanks," Corey says, rubbing her arm.

Sharon awaits Grandpa's thanks. He rolls on his feet and his scared eyes look to the tiled ceiling. I slap his arm. "What? Huh?"

I make angry eyes at him.

He scratches his bald spot and says, "Oh, yeah. Thank you, Mr. Or Miss. Er, very nice...of you."

Sharon shakes her head, grins, and pecks my cheek. As she walks out, I catch a few guys checking her out. I smirk and roll my eyes.

"What time is it, anyway?" I ask.

As Grandpa checks his watch, a cop shouts, "Hey, no smoking in here. Take it outside."

I exhale smoke and mumble, "Fucking Bloomberg."

"Hey, he's a good mayor." Grandpa puts his arm around me and shows me out of the police station. Corey keeps to my other side and rubs my back. I leave the police station with two of the most important men in my life and I have never felt so safe.

HOME BUT STILL POISONED

In the cab, I sit between Grandpa and Corey. A million volts run through my veins and my heart can't stop it. I rest my head on Grandpa's chest, close my eyes, and try to relax.

"I was so worried about you," he says.

I sigh. "I'm sorry to put you through that, Grandpa. But Sharon took care of it. It's all over."

"No, not the arrest," he says. "I was worried about the other thing. You never experienced that before. No?"

I've experienced various emotions and pain from other people throughout my life. People getting beaten, hit by cars, stubbing their toes, suffering the emotions of losing a loved one, and even the burn from a relationship break up, to name a few. But have I ever experienced a murder?

"No," I whisper. "This is my fist."

Grandpa kisses the top of my head. Although he has never suffered the curse since it came from my grandmother's side of the family, he knows the right amount of compassion to give while also keeping a safe distance and not bombarding me with questions and concerns.

As soon as we get home to my studio condo, Grandpa Blaise kisses my cheek and tells me for the millionth time how glad he is that I'm all right. He then says good night and heads up to his bedroom loft.

I walk to the kitchen and grab a couple of bottles of water. I toss one across the room to Corey. He catches it and plops down on the black, cushy couch in the living room. The space is sectioned off by design with a kitchen, a living room, a work area, and a dining room. Most of the apartment is picture perfect with trendy Formica, wood, and paints straight out of a Better Living magazine. My work section – which takes up almost half of the studio - is an artistic mess filled with oil paints, canvases, wood, easels, and piles of sketchpads.

I stomp over the hardwood floor and sit next to Corey. My body aches too much to sleep and invisible sticks hold my eyes open. We sit, breathe, and listen to the hot water gurgle through the radiator pipes.

"So how did the date go tonight?" I ask, sipping the water, hoping it'll ease me out of a hangover.

Corey turns to me, one leg under his butt. "Horrible to the tenth degree. Ever go out with a rent boy?"

I smile. "No. But I doubt one would be interested in me since I'm not packing a penis."

"True. Well, let me tell you, girl. If you grow one, don't do it. We were having a good time over at the Glowing Chair on Christopher and guess what happened?"

"His dick fell off and you discovered he's really a she."

"Oh, I wish. No, his phone rings. He checks the number and actually answers the phone like one of those Wall Street subway goons. The boy is actually talking to a client and setting up a date... for, like, that moment."

I laugh. "You poor boy."

"I know. So I confront him about it and he asks me if I would mind that he met up with some married guy for an hour so he can do business and meet me right back here."

"And you said yes."

Corey glares at me like I want to bang him on the couch. "You psycho bitch, you. No. I told him to fuck off. I'm gonna be seventeen this year. I'm a little too old to be sloppy seconds. I don't care if the guys are married or I sound like a stuck up queen. I got standards now."

I rub his arm and ask, "So you came home early tonight?"

"Very."

"Shit. I should have called you. We could have hung out and I wouldn't have gotten into this mess."

Corey moves a strand of long black hair from my face. "Are you okay?"
I sigh and rub the cold bottle on my head. "Yeah, just... it was fucked up."
"You want to talk about it?"

I kiss his cheek. "Maybe tomorrow. I'm beat." I stand up, hand him the bottle, and then stretch.

"Are you working in the morning?" he asks, capping off the bottles and placing them on the glass coffee table.

"Yeah, I have to. Do I have any canvases ready?"

"No. But I'll make some." He smiles. "I'll be ready, boss."

I kiss him good night and walk down the hall under the loft to my bedroom. Closing the door, I take off my jacket and clothes. Standing in my underwear, I inspect the wounds. Purple lines criss-cross my palms and belly where the knife stabbed in my vision. I poke at them and spark tender pain. From previous experiences I have learned that bruising is as far as the damage goes. One time when an upstairs neighbor was kicking the shit out of his girlfriend, Grandpa was worried that I might have some internal damage to my stomach or ribs. The doctors found nothing beyond foot shaped bruises. It took me a while to convince the doctor that I wasn't beaten at home. I gave him some story about being mugged.

I plop into bed under the constellations I painted on the ceiling last year and then close my eyes. All I can see is the shadowed killer swinging that knife and feel the blade slicing through my organs. "God damn it." I roll on my side and open my eyes. The clock reads just after 3 AM. My night isn't going to get any easier.

A CLEANER LIGHT

The harsh buzz of the alarm startles me out of a deep sleep. I moan and roll onto my back. I can't believe I forgot to turn it off. The clock reads 7:30 AM. I slam my hand down on the button and the alarm stops. I try to keep my eyes closed, hoping to go back to sleep, but they just shoot open like those old window shades from cartoons. Mustering all my strength I manage to get out of bed.

After using the bathroom, I stumble down the hall and into the kitchen. Corey saws planks of wood for my canvas, acting the good assistant. I then remember that I'm only in a black bra and panties and quickly look up to the loft.

"He left for work an hour ago." Corey glances over. His gesso-stained sweatshirt is already covered with saw-dust. He turns back to his frame and starts nailing the pieces together. Ever since Corey went back to school he's been fine-tuning his process. His hands move fast, like a machine, sometimes I don't even catch him looking at his work, but it always comes out perfect.

"Oh, thanks," I mutter.

For some reason, Grandpa thinks that I shouldn't walk around in my underwear with Corey home for fear that he might attack me. "But he's gay," I tell him. Grandpa just grunts, scrunches his face, and leaves it at that.

In a way I only have my mother to blame. She used to do the same thing when I was smaller. I always suspected she was a nudist at heart and managed to keep the bare minimum for my sake. Maybe I am too.

I pour myself some coffee and sit on a stool at the kitchen island. The morning paper is spread out, already inspected by Grandpa before he left for work driving a city bus. I

spot a story about the murder of Katherine Moore on page two. The picture the press runs is the first time I've seen her face. The chick is a pretty, dirty blond girl posing with her chin on her shoulder. Based on the bland blue background, the image could be a school photo or something done in a department store. The article says that her death is tragic since she attended the NYU Stern School of Business. She was active with the International Business Association, Beta Alpha Psi, and the Student Social Venture Fund. Her father, a Vice President at Chase Bank, and mother, a social worker from New Jersey, are deeply distraught over their daughter's murder. The article builds her up as the next greatest living human being and savior to the economy. And stupid me thinks her death is tragic just because she was a human.

So far the police have no leads, but there's a witness (me) and because of their age they can't reveal their name.

"Yes."

I check the rest of the paper and make sure no one ran any of those pictures from last night.

"Good news?" Corey asks from across the room.

"Yeah, looks like I can move on with my life."

"Oh, you mean as a famous alcoholic artist?"

"Yes, that one," I say and then flip him a bird.

I skim the rest of the paper when Corey starts hammering nails into the frame.

...my thumb explodes with pain...

Corey and I scream out. He drops his hammer and sucks on his thumb. I shake my hand, trying to throw off the throbbing just under the fingernail.

"God damn it, Corey."

"Gee, like I wanted to hit my thumb on purpose," he mumbles over the digit.

I keep my mouth shut and wait for the pain to subside. He's right. It's not his fault. It's mine for being cursed.

CLEARING THE BRAIN OF PAIN

After Corey leaves for school, I sit alone with my blank canvas. I want to start working on the sketches from my pads, but another image keeps pushing in my mind. Grabbing a pencil and bypassing the early draft stage, I step up to the 4X5 foot white space and clear my brain. Pencil to the gesso, my hand glides across the rough surface. I start on the killer's shapes, angled to look up from the alley floor. I don't remember much in detail. It was a dark alley. But I reveal the bowler, the overcoat with the collar up, and the hand holding the knife, just about ready to stab me in the stomach.

I stop and sit for a minute. There's something else. Or someone else.

I walk to the stereo, pop in a Bowery Electric CD, and return to the canvas. My conscious focuses on the drawing while my subconscious absorbs the eclectic music and drum machine beats. I hold the memory, the moment in my mind, trying to make it clearer. And then I see it. Yes, right there behind the killer, just over his shoulder. I start to sketch the wrinkled face, the angry eyes, the flared nostrils, and the pointed ears.

I step back and shake my head.

"I thought you were there."

Although I don't have a name for him, I've been drawing this evil face for as long as I remember. After I experience someone else's pain - pain perpetrated by another human

being - this face is always hidden somewhere. I know it's not of a real person. Sometimes I would see it in odd and inhuman places like open cabinets or windows five stories above the ground. I'm sure a shrink would have a field day with me if I ever talk about it; probably tell me I have deep issues with my father. Maybe I do. But I doubt the face has anything to do with that.

Anyway, I make myself another cup of coffee and sit in an office chair in front of the canvas. Another part of my process is to relax and let the details float to the top of my brain. For as long as it takes. And it does. I stand up with the fresh bit of information and sketch the shapes by the killer's wrist: sort of like a turd tapered at the end. It has six legs, three on each side. I'm about to stand back when I remember something else. The tapered side has three sticks, one in the center, and two on either side that curve out.

The door buzzer blares over the music.

"Fuck." I slam the pencil down and spin around. I hate when this happens. I check the clock and see that it's too early for Grandpa or Corey, and they would never be stupid enough to ring the buzzer. The mailman? Unless it's a new guy Bernard knows not to ring it either.

I walk to the door and press the talk button.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Michelina Radicci, please."

I hit the wall next to the speaker. "Yeah, speaking. What?"

"This is Detective Otto Sampson of the NYPD. We met last night."

"I remember."

"I would like to have a word with you, please."

I sigh and buzz him in. It's not like he's going to arrest me. I can't imagine that they found new damning evidence. Sharon's too good a lawyer to let that happen. I just hope he doesn't plan on talking to me about the murder. I'm so not in the mood. Shit, I should have told him to meet later.

I wait by the door and spot Detective Sampson walking down the hall. Alone. He wears the same suit I saw him in last. His face droops down and his eyes look sunken. The poor guy was probably up all night.

"Where's your sidekick?" I ask.

"Detective Hersh? He's running a few leads, talking to family." He smiles. Damn. If he weren't a cop twice my age, I would so put a move on him. Yes, I'm sixteen, but come on. A little Lolita action would be fun.

I hold the door open and show the detective in. "Shouldn't you be doing the same?"

"I will. But I'm chasing another lead. That's why they have us in pairs."

I close the door and cross my arms. "Listen, do I need my lawyer for this? I thought I was cleared as a suspect."

Sampson wanders to my work area. "You are. But like I said at the station, I still think you'll be useful to the investigation."

He stops at my latest project and tilts his head to the side. "I'm sorry. Did I interrupt you working?"

I stand next to him, mentally willing him to stop looking at my unfinished work.

"Yeah. So if you don't mind, can we make this short?"

Sampson turns and smiles. "Of course. First off." He reaches into his wool overcoat pocket and takes out a clanky piece of metal. He offers my butterfly knife.

“Oh, my God.” I take it from him. “I didn’t think I would see it again.”

“The medical examiner concluded that the weapon used was much bigger than this one. I see no reason to keep it.”

I flip the knife around like an experienced ninja and open the blade. “Thanks.” I flip it closed and slip it into my back jean pocket.

“Sentimental?” he asks.

“Belonged to my uncle. He gave it to me before he left.”

“Moved away?”

“No. Jail.”

“I bet there’s a long and interesting story to that.”

I cross my arms and give him the hard eyes. “There is. But we shouldn’t waste time about it. You have a killer to catch.”

“Yes.” He grins. “I do. Speaking of, I take it this latest work is of the murder?”

“Yeah. But don’t worry. I’m not displaying it, or selling it. It’ll just be part of my private collection.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrug and act mute. I don’t want to get into why all the works of the evil face are locked up in storage. Not even Corey, Grandpa, Uncle Tony, or my parents have seen them or even know about the face.

“Well, anyway. I guess I came for some answers. My question is how did a young woman who was blocks away from a murder and has not even inspected the body know in such great detail how the victim was killed?”

“I can’t answer that.”

He shakes his head and sighs.

“I mean, I can sort of tell you,” I say. “I just can’t tell you why.”

“What?”

“I have psychic empathy. Sort of like telepathy. Okay?” I shoot out. “If you don’t mind, keep this to yourself. Last thing I need are asshole reporters giving me shit about it.”

I wait for him to laugh or doubt me or flash me a look like I’m crazy. He doesn’t. He just watches me and waits for me to say more.

“It’s like being a psychic,” I say. “I mean, I can’t see into people’s futures or pasts... It’s like... I’m this antenna, a receiver, and I pick up people’s negative emotions, mostly their pain. Then I experience them. Like there was this one time we had this couple living above us, and the guy was always beating the woman. That was so not a good time. I had pains in my arms and bruises broke out around my stomach and back. It took a long time for you guys to finally arrest him. That bitch was crazy, though. You know the story: Girl loves the guy so much she thinks one day he will stop kicking her ass and change. Shit like that.”

“Okay,” Sampson says.

“So why aren’t you leaving?”

“Because I’m still listening.”

“You believe me?”

“I’ve heard stranger. And it’s the only thing that makes sense right now.”

“You’re fucking weird,” I say, walking off to a window.

Sampson laughs.

“Listen, I know you didn’t kill anyone. The victim walked down that alley, probably because she knew her killer. There is no sign of a struggle, and all evidence supports she was killed in that alley,” Sampson says. “We showed your picture to the victim’s family and friends and they have no clue who you are. I double-checked to make sure that you and the victims haven’t crossed paths before and to be honest your lives are on opposite ends of the spectrum. I guess you could say she was a social girl and you’re a hermit. When your lawyer mentioned her name to you back at the station, you had no idea who she was either. I don’t think you’re lying. So yes. I do believe you until there is evidence to think otherwise.”

I turn to him. “Great. Thanks. So what do you want from me?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe there was something you can tell me. A clue, a lead, something that we missed. So far we have no suspects. The crime scene is a busy area, so it’s hard to gather solid evidence. This girl was a good kid with a bright future. She didn’t run with a bad crowd. She partied like any other college kid, but kept clean and functional; never came to class drunk. She had a boyfriend, but the relationship was still new and he has an alibi for last night. No one has a bad word to say about her. If this keeps up, the killer is going to get away.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Yes, you do.” He points to the canvas. “I think you can tell us something by showing us what the victim saw. Maybe there’s a detail that can lead to their identity.”

“You want me to draw and paint every painful moment so you can scrutinize it?”

“Looks like you started already.”

“No offense, but you’re nuts. Forget it. It’s bad enough that I experienced this girl’s death. I don’t want to have to keep reliving it. It was not fun being stabbed in the stomach.”

“I would imagine.”

“No. You can’t imagine. I’d like to forget it. This is the last and only picture I’m doing of it, just so I can purge the memory. Then I will lock this away until I die and some curator finds it and shows it to the world. By then it won’t matter.”

Defeat weighs down Sampson’s features. “I understand. It’s a crazy idea anyway.”

“Uh, you do? Great.”

“Do you mind if I take some notes of your sketch?” he asks.

I shrug. “Go ahead. Knock yourself out.”

I sit down in my comfy chair and wait for him to finish writing.

“What’s this?” he asks.

I turn, hoping he’s not going to ask about the evil face in the background. Instead he’s pointing to the strange shape at the killer’s wrist.

“Dunno. You?”

Sampson shakes his head and carefully duplicates my drawing.

Done, he hands me a business card from out of his pocket. “If you get anything new, would you please contact me?”

I pocket the card. “Yeah. But I’m sure I won’t.”

He nods and smiles grim. “Thanks for talking to me.”

Detective Sampson shows himself out. I sit back into my office chair and stare at the canvas. I try to relax, breathe deep, and stretch my muscles. Nothing floats out to my brain.

“Shit,” I say.

I grab the pencil and try to run it across the canvas, but I just can’t get my hand to do it. I throw the pencil across the room and stomp off to my bedroom. I slip on my Docs and jacket and leave the apartment. Maybe some icy winter air will clear my head.

GIGGLE TREATMENT

I pay for the bottle of whisky and the Indian man behind the counter of the bodega slips it into a brown paper bag. I study his face for a trace of fear or suspicion; for any sign that he knows my ID is fake. None. His expression is so blank. Not like I’m worried. My IDs are pristine. Uncle Tony is a great teacher, and I am a great student. Unfortunately he isn’t a great criminal since he got busted and sent to prison.

Outside, I slip the buds back into my ears and press play on the MP3 player in my leather jacket pocket. The mix folder of Sonic Youth tracks fills my head as I brave the winter winds up West Street to Pier 25. I rush past the basketball courts and the skate park. Even though it’s in the low thirties today, some kids are stupid enough to play ball or ride the curves. Normally the basketball players don’t bother me. It’s rare that a fight would break out or someone would scrape their knee on the court. But the skaters are something to worry about. I am so not in the mood to experience a busted arm or a crack on the head. It’s a shame though. I wish I could just hang out and watch the boys skate; some of them are pretty cute.

I turn onto Pier 25 and walk through the playground. A few parents and nannies supervise bundled up toddlers on the jungle gyms. A couple of old men, probably homeless from the looks of their black stained jackets, sit on the benches. I stop at a bench farther down to avoid any misery that they have in them. I daze off at the Jersey City business district as the boats and ferries trek back and forth across the Hudson. I sip the whisky and ignore the dirty looks people give me for drinking in a park. Not like I’m some hobo, like that crazy make-up lady that found my body the other night. I make just as much as those yuppies that think they’re superior.

As hard as I distract myself and try to concentrate on my art, I still can’t get the conversation with Detective Sampson out of my head. I mentally curse at myself and threaten that I will throw my bottle into the river if I think of the murder one more time. It’s over. I doubt Detective Sampson will bother me again or that I’ll read about it in the paper in a few days. I should just get on with my life.

I close my eyes, sip more whisky, and feel the calming effects as it mixes with my antidepressants. My sleepy brain sways, wrapped in a chemical cushion, as Sonic Youth eases into a long noise solo in the middle of the extended cut of “Diamond Sea.” Oh, yes. I will be so ready to work when I get home.

The phone vibrates on my hip.

“Shit!”

I put the music on pause and pull the cell out of my pocket. The number reads unlisted. I should let it go to voice mail, but sometimes Sharon comes up as unlisted. I press the button and bring the phone to my head.

“What’s up, Sharon,” I say.

No one answers.

“Uh, hello. Sharon?”

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