

Chapter 1:

It was midmorning on a Monday when magic walked into my life wearing a beige Ann Taylor suit and sensible flats. At the time I had more money than sense, and so I had been languishing at the Leishman Psychiatric Center in Silver Lake for just over six months.

The Center had a rigid routine, and there was a perverse comfort in knowing what misery of boredom to expect and when. Breakfast: grayish sausage, carbohydrate mush, and the kind of eggs that are poured from a carton, all eaten with plastic utensils. Physical therapy: a rotating assortment of blue shirted people who urgently pressured me to feel happy about accomplishing things a three-year-old could do. Patio break: a chain-link enclosed concrete yard where everyone else flocked to light up coffin nails and trade confessions. Knowing they'd all be gone in three to fourteen days and wouldn't stay in touch, I elected to sit in the fluorescent-lit common room and run reel after reel of movies in my head.

When a well-dressed woman stopped with purpose beside my chair that Monday, I assumed she was one of the Center's bureaucracy. She was of average height and build, with a conservative suit and ethnically ambiguous features. Her face was drab and powdered matte; her hair and eyes were a muddle of colors that defied category. If she had drawn a revolver, shot me in the kneecap, and walked out, I'd have a hell of a time describing her to security.

Although her appearance put her in the ballpark of my age, she addressed me in a flat, husky alto that had forty years of smoke and whiskey in it. "Millicent Roper," she said.

"Yeah?" I was hesitant because when people in the movies say a name in that tone, the next line is usually, "You're under arrest." Instead she extended a gloved hand.

People do not wear gloves in Los Angeles. These weren't cold-weather gloves either, but light dress gloves the same shell pink as her blouse, their cuffs disappearing beneath the sleeves of her jacket.

"I'm Caryl Vallo with the Arcadia Project," she said.

"I don't know what that is," I said, leaving my hands in my lap. She withdrew the gesture with no change of expression. "We are a nonprofit organization partially funded by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. I would be pleased to tell you more if we can speak confidentially. Could we retire briefly to another area?"

Her formality nudged my brain into a rusty gear that I eventually recognized as curiosity. "Fine," I said. "We can go back to my room."

I grabbed the wheels of my chair and rolled myself down the hall with practiced economy. The chair was a squeaky piece of crap, and I found myself embarrassed by it.

"I was under the impression that you used prosthetics for walking," Caryl said.

"Only when I have somewhere to go. The AK socket starts to dig into my ass if I'm just sitting around."

"Are your prosthetics in your room?"

"Yeah."

"Will you put them on for me?"

"Sure."

Before you ask why I was so docile about an invasive request from a complete stranger, keep in mind that I'd spent the past year of my life following the orders of a

procession of doctors, therapists, and other random concerned people whose names I sometimes didn't even bother to learn.

I was paying extra for privacy, so there was a desk in my room where a second twin bed would have been. When we arrived, Caryl seated herself at it, pushing back the chair. "Are you happy here?" she asked me, looking around. She seemed an extension of the bland decor.

"If I were happy," I grunted, wheeling myself over to the locked chest containing my prosthetics, "I wouldn't be here."

Caryl, declining to comment, skimmed gloved fingertips over her tightly bound hair. I tried not to think about my own cowlicked mess, a few inches long all over except for a mostly hidden seam on the left side where hair didn't grow at all.

"Forgive my poor choice of words," she said. "Do you feel this is the best living situation for you at this time?"

"With my job and credit history," I said as I braked my chair, "I think my only other option is a refrigerator box." I took the key from around my neck, leaned over to unlock the chest, and pulled out my bottle of Dry-Lite, applying a generous amount to the stump of my right shin. I glanced at Caryl and found her watching me with the politely attentive expression of someone in the front row of a lecture hall.

"So," I said, lifting my BK prosthesis out of the trunk. "You were about to tell me about the Arcadia Project." I aligned the suction suspension and slid my shin into it. Once the carbon foot was solidly on the floor, I pushed myself to a stand with both hands, balancing one-legged and forcing the rest of the air out of the valve with a moist, embarrassing sound.

"The Arcadia Project," said Caryl, "is funded partially by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and partially by private donations from members of the entertainment industry. We seek mentally ill adults who meet certain qualifications and provide them with meaningful employment, housing, and ongoing—"

"What sort of employment?" I interrupted as I pivoted to sit down on the edge of my bed.

"Employment opportunities vary depending upon the qualifications of the individual, but the majority are part-time or freelance creative positions in the film and television industry."

I blinked at her a few times, an assortment of sarcastic replies clotting together in my brain like cars on the 405. I tried to remember my former Hollywood manners, then remembered that as a mental patient I had a license to say whatever the hell I wanted.

"Let me be sure I understand," I said, reaching into the chest for the silicone suspension liner of my AK prosthetic and starting to powder the inside of it. "I flipped burgers for five years putting myself through community college, got fifteen grand into debt making a bunch of pretentious indie films about people trapped in rooms together, then bullshitted my way into what's arguably the most prestigious film school in the world, when all I really needed to do to break into the industry was jump off a building?"

Caryl looked at me with the kind of aplomb that comes from dealing with the mentally ill on a daily basis. "No," she said flatly. "You needed to do all that and *then* jump off a building." There was nothing in her demeanor to suggest that she was making a joke, or even knew what one was.

I snorted at her, hiking up the leg of my shorts. I slipped the powdered liner onto the stump of my thigh as far as it would go.

“You used lotion to make the first seal and powder to make the second,” Caryl observed. “Why?”

I stopped and looked at her, but her face held only the same detached curiosity. “You just learn to do whatever works,” I said with a shrug. “Every amputation is different.”

I reached into the chest for the AK. AK stands for above-knee, but I liked that it sounded like an assault rifle. The silicone-only suspension fit like flesh, and with a twist of a knob the hydraulic knee gave the right resistance at anything from a stroll to a sprint. There are some occasions when a girl just has to splurge a little.

“So you think I fit some kind of qualifications?” I said, shoving my thigh and its silicone sheath into the socket of the prosthesis. “Now there’s a list I’d love to see.”

“Most of the list is confidential, but I can tell you some of it. I am looking for people with management potential, and your success as an independent filmmaker points to leadership skill and creative thinking. Then there is your diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and your willingness to accept and manage that condition, as well as your noted aversion to psychoactive drugs, legal or otherwise.”

“Drugs don’t work on BPD,” I said defensively, squirming my way more firmly into the socket and wondering how the hell she knew I’d never tried recreational drugs. “It’s not a chemical imbalance.”

“Nonetheless, many Borderlines choose to medicate comorbid conditions such as anxiety or depression. Our project only accepts those who can function, at least minimally, without the use of controlled substances.”

I paused to sweep a hand pointedly around the room. “Is there something that makes you think I can function?”

“The twenty-five years of your life that elapsed before you did something colossally stupid.”

Indignation flared, and my thighs responded by trying to push me to a stand. But that’s exactly the sort of thing a prosthetic knee cannot do, and my weight was centered over both legs. So I just ended up lurching a few crooked inches off the seat and crashing right back down.

“Be careful,” said Caryl mildly.

One of the fun bits about BPD is a phenomenon shrinks like to call “splitting.” When under stress, Borderlines forget the existence of gray. Life is a beautiful miracle, or a cesspool of despair. The film you’re making is a Best Picture candidate, or it’s garbage. People are either saints, or they’re scheming to destroy you.

Caryl Vallo, thanks to the shards of pain jangling through my pelvis, had just found her way onto the latter list. But she was dangling a hell of a prize, so I pushed aside my sudden surge of paranoid hatred and tried to keep my voice as calm as hers.

“There has to be a catch,” I said. “Otherwise every starving wannabe in Los Angeles would be faking BPD to get this gig. So why aren’t they?”

“Because they do not know about it.”

She gave the words no more gravity than anything else she had said, but some intuition made the hairs rise on the back of my neck. I considered her stony face and her

trimly tailored jacket. Aside from wardrobe color, she fit the Man in Black profile perfectly, and I didn't have much to lose by sounding crazy.

"Does this job involve aliens in any way?"

"Not in the way you mean," she said without asking what I meant. "There are, however, some aspects of the job that strain credulity, and they are better demonstrated than explained. Would you meet me tomorrow for an interview?"

"Sure, why not."

"You can find me at the corner of Fourth Street and Hollister, in Santa Monica. There is a small park there."

I felt a cold rush of fear that I quickly paved over with irritation. "I'm supposed to take a cab all the way from Silver Lake to Santa Monica?"

Caryl ignored my tone. "Tomorrow at noon. Pack and proceed as though you will not be returning to the hospital."

"I beg your pardon?" I gaped at her. "How am I supposed to get a suitcase, a wheelchair, crutches, and a cane in and out of a taxi on my own?"

"The choice is yours. The terms are mine. If you do not attend the meeting, I will move to the next candidate on my list. You are welcome to refuse the opportunity, but you will be the first to do so in the ten years I have been with the Project."

Ten years. She was definitely older than she looked. "What if you decide you don't want to hire me?"

"Then you may return to the hospital, or not, as you like. But if I weren't confident of your character, I would not have gone to the trouble to reach you."

"How much trouble is it, exactly, to call the—" Wait a second. No one had introduced her. And shouldn't she have been wearing a name tag or something?

Carefully I pushed myself to a stand. Caryl remained seated, making no move to stop me. I forced the remaining air out of my AK suspension, then slowly walked to the door. I called down the hallway toward the nurses' station, and then glanced back over my shoulder into the room, half expecting to find myself staring down the barrel of a gun. But not even my hyperbolic filmmaker's imagination could prepare me for what I saw.

Nothing. The woman I had been talking to was gone