

## **The Line of Fate**

With her teeth Tabitha tore the sutures from the middle finger of her left-hand Ostrich glove in the Nordstrom's bathroom. The nubby sections of dyed red leather pulled away from each other like a bad cut. The flesh of her middle finger, manicured tip golden as the newest winter make-up trend, turned purple as she ran cold water over the exposed flesh.

“This is almost like getting a new finger,” she said towards the bathroom mirror. “One step closer to a better hand.”

Holiday music jazzed its sugarplums through the speakers. The air smelled of too much cinnamon.

Under the florescence her finger looked alien, not belonging to her but more like a tangible flash of humanity thrust through the surface of so much cold weather gear. From her wooly beret to her snow boots, Tabitha had shrouded her body from the effects of the Pacific Northwest's endless winter to brave the department store crowds.

Black velveteen, a green plaid wool blend, now the red Ostrich, in the weeks since Halloween and the first appearance of storm clouds descending over the city Tabitha chewed through three pair of gloves. Always in the bathroom at Nordstrom's, always in front of a curved, water splattered mirror, now with an audience of Christmas carolers Santa Babying her on.

“Santa Baby, I've been an awful good girl,” she purred towards the mirror. “Though it's funny for me to call myself a forty-year-old girl.”

Other women squirted holiday-scented hand sanitizer onto their palms, emergency travel sized Bath and Body backup, to avoid stepping too near the woman who appeared to eat leather.

The women never got close enough, the straps of various brand-named bags cutting off circulation to their wrists as they created a consumer fueled barrier, to realize Tabitha was only pretending. Not to devour the most expensive gloves the city offered, but to break through those gloves with new hands. Each time, for the few moments it took her well-moisturized, well-tended skin to surface, she could pretend she was cataloging the hand of a stranger. Something so foreign in its dimensions, smooth as the fired bisque of the patients she once helped mend at the Doll Hospital in her mother's basement.

Her mother, the town seamstress in a time when people fixed clothes instead of throwing them out, ran her Doll Hospital on the side after Tabitha's father died. Tabitha sat across from her mother at the card table under the glare of harsh basement lighting. For hours every night her mother worked under the dim flicker to mend frayed bows or set fallen, synthetic curls. She also solved the common emergency crisis of children over-loving their doll companions into an early grave by gluing back together a shattered face or broken pelvis.

An amateur astrologist, Tabitha's mother made up stories for each doll she repaired; an explanation as to how such a lovely strawberry headed or chocolate curled thing could wind up in a stranger's basement surrounded by sewing bric-a-brac and the occasional mouse dropping.

Baby Doll, the patient from the neighbor girl who always combed her doll's hair so hard, the plastic fibers almost fused together, was obviously born under the sign of Taurus.

"How do you know that?" Tabitha would ask.

She clutched her Raggedy Ann doll tight to her chest. With a free hand she reached her stubby fingers towards the newest specimen but never touched. Those were the rules.

"Well, this doll was born under the sign of Taurus just like you, Tabby, because she is obstinate."

"Obstinate?"

The smell of doll hair hanged sickly sweet in the small room.

"Stubborn. Steadfast. Loyal to a fault if you ask me." Her mother held up the blonde mess towards her daughter's face. "Look how she takes such abuse. Poor thing belongs to a girl who doesn't even know how to comb a doll's hair."

"Because her mommy never taught her better?"

"Yes, Tabby, you are right."

Just this one time the child stuck her small pinkie finger deep inside the newly formed curl her mother had worked from a tangle into a ringlet. The yellow hair wrapped around her finger the way a baby grabs hold of a grown-up's much larger hand.

Her mother asked, "But do you know why Baby Doll will be okay?"

"Because she has such pretty hair?"

Tabitha released her finger the second she said this, afraid of giving preferential treatment to some stranger's companion over Raggedy Ann and her fuzzy bouffant of red yarn.

“Because no one's marred her hands. Look at her beautiful little hands. Hands, my girl, are the real windows of the soul. Come closer and see.”

Tabitha set Raggedy Ann on the table. Bending her head almost close enough for her lips to touch Baby Doll's fingers, Tabitha examined the doll's little white hands. Bone white. Teacup white. Reaching the middle of a Creamsicle on a summer day white with light pink fingernails almost too tiny to see. And palms smooth as an eggshell with just the slightest indentation of a line.

“Do you know, my girl, why dolls live forever? Why no matter how cracked or beaten or broken, they can always be fixed? It's because of their line of fate. Their hands have been blessed with eternal life. Wish we could all be so lucky to possess those palms. Now look, here's Violet Doll. Her owner really seems to enjoy eating honey. And here's Sunny Doll, a trooper to the end. Definitely a Virgo. So conscientious of everything all the time.”

Her mother's words floated away from Tabitha as she studied the palms of each of the dolls lying in decidedly unladylike heaps on the card table. More than anything, even more than the new silver bike in the front window of Mason's Department Store, she wanted to reinvent her palms. Even as a child Tabitha longed for a clean slate. In her head she called it a do-over and the thin book on fortune telling in her school's library confirmed her suspicions. Other mothers tried to ban the volume, one in a set of slumber party games that detailed, with cartoon images, everything from how to apply eye

shadow to how to throw a make-your-own pizza party. The book, really a junior high aged read the younger girls salivated over like the sweetest, and most illicit, contraband, contained an entire section on fortune telling. Every genre of what the League of Christian Mothers deemed the Dark Arts was represented: reading tea leaves, fortune telling with a crystal ball, tarot cards. What interested Tabitha most was a diagram of a palm, a pen and ink drawing splayed across the book like half of an emphatic clap.

Her mother's eye widened when Tabitha showed her the diagram one day after school.

"Why look at that. And they say the school system in Branchwood isn't progressive. I bet you dollars to donuts some old biddy somewhere is less than thrilled this book exists. See, my girl."

Her mother pointed to the Heart Line, Head Line, Life Line and the Line of Fortune. Even after studying the diagrams Tabitha could not differentiate the scratchy indents etched along her own palms. If there was a Line of Fate somewhere in the fleshy confusion, her mother never brought it to her attention. Maybe her child brain figured this meant she was born with a Line of Fate that, no matter how much she moisturized and manicured was, somehow, eternally broken.

After a series of more books, the words getting longer, the diagrams as each year passed deepening their detail, Tabitha sought out professional psychics to read her palm. The money spent on what her first, second, third, and current, husband called utter frivolity could keep the psychics in tarot cards for decades.

The thing about psychics, Tabitha thought as the cinnamon air of the Nordstrom's women's bathroom spiced around her exposed finger, is that each one tells me something entirely different.

"I am through with all this supposed seeing into the future. What I need is to change my destiny," she still spoke towards the mirror, "and everyone knows there is only one way to do that. Excuse me," Tabitha questioned the mirrored reflection of another shopper.

The shopper washed her hands in the next sink over without shying away from the woman who chewed on her own gloves.

"Me?"

"Do you know if there is a Chinatown around here?"

"It's nowhere near the size of the one in San Francisco but it's big enough to find lunch and tea I think?"

The woman wrote directions on a towel. She handed the towel to Tabitha's intact, gloved finger.

"Do you think they will mind my silly gloves in Chinatown?" she asked.

"I doubt it. They probably won't even notice, what with it being so cold outside."

Tabitha looked up from staring at the handbag she wore snug in the crook of her right arm. "Oh I'm sorry. I was talking to my doll. I always carry at least one or two around with me wherever I go. I have one resting in my bag as we speak."

The woman scurried towards the bathroom door. Tabitha didn't notice as she placed the ripped red glove finger in her pocket.

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Chinatown comprised two streets that ran parallel to each other with two smaller streets cut through the middle. Decades ago city planners replaced the street lamps in the small quadrant with red lampposts. Yellow metal dragons wrapped around each pole before showing their fangs at the top of each light. Tabitha assumed as she walked past a restaurant and a teahouse towards an herbalist that the city intended these lamps to beckon tourists towards the city's "ethnically diverse" section of town. And it actually worked! She had seen the Youtube videos of young couples throwing wedding receptions in dim sum restaurants with at least one or two girls in the bridal party possessing that wave of Suzi Wong bangs curved at the top of their dyed black hair.

"Maybe I just need new bangs instead of a new palm?" she spoke towards her purse. The doll waiting inside did not answer back.

Ducks hanged by their cooked feet in grease-smearred windows. A row of identical stores sold those little black silk slippers with the brown rubber bottoms. "Wouldn't you look cute in a pair of those?" she again spoke towards her purse.

Tabitha knew to stop walking when all of the store signs and then even the street signs changed into Chinese characters. How could she explain what she wanted to an herbalist, anyway? She imagined herbalists to be more like apothecaries of old, able to dispense spicy medicines suspended in drops of hardened sugar. One of her friends swore by the poultice an herbalist in Seattle mixed for her to improve fertility. Another touted ginseng tea as a cure to end her addiction to sugar before making all her friends swear to never post her secret on Facebook.

Tabitha enjoyed sugar like everyone else, but not to the point of overeating. She didn't need a poultice to cure anything or a potion to find love or even a magic spell for good fortune. Her body never ached, she only ate candy when she was on her period, her husband loved her and made more than enough money for her to add to her doll collection every other week. She was the rare kind of person who believed she was living a good, genuine life.

Only this life belonged to someone else.

She was born with the wrong Line of Fate. Sometimes this happened, a psychic told her years ago. Did your mother induce labor? Was your father in the Navy? No. No. Was he a gentle lover? Did your mother eat too many blueberry scones when she was pregnant?

All these random bits of flotsam, harmless occurrences mixed with facts that make a life, can sometimes add up to a person being born with the wrong palms. The psychic quickly corrected herself as Tabitha held her purse tight and scanned for the exit door past all the incense and colored scarves.

“There's nothing to be afraid of. It's not always like you're walking around with a specific person's life plan instead of your own, though it has been known to happen. It's more likely your palm lines are a little out of focus. Blurred at the edges, if that sounds better. Feathered and intersected, someone in charge drafted the blueprint of your destiny one size too small to contain all your deepest dreams.”

“But I don't even remember my dreams,” Tabitha had told the psychic.

“Exactly,” the psychic answered.



She showed Tabitha a brochure, glossy and tri-folded, of options to change the course of her destiny. This menu of incantations contained the exact price the psychic charged, plus tax and gratuity, next to each intended outcome.

As Tabitha stood in front of the herbalist's door she forgot which spells she had asked the psychic to concoct for her. She had seen so many psychics at this point, and read so many of their menus, her memories were smudging around their perimeters, much like the Line of Fate on both of her palms. Whatever amount she paid, plus gratuity, had not alter the course of anything except her husband's wallet.

A bell tied to the door jingled as she entered the herbal shop. The man at the front counter looked up from a Chinese soap opera, complete with the requisite love-tormented characters over-emoting from a small television.

“You are in the wrong store,” the man said.

“But I was told...”

The man raised the television's volume. He turned to speak to Tabitha over the romantic melee. “We have nothing for you here. Your problem is much more serious than too many cigarettes or cream puffs or the fact that you always carry a doll around in your purse.”

Her heart galloped. Tabitha felt around in her coat pocket for the finger of her torn glove as if this man could see not only through her body to the soul beneath, but inside her designer handbag and the lined pockets of her expensive wool coat as well. She had left a trail of torn gloves all over town. Her husband would probably commit her if he ever saw the abused finger sheaths scattered like tongues in various city parks close to their condo, found objects for an artist to place in a diary or a child to collect or even a

group of teenage boys to make sexual innuendos over. She wanted to throw the finger at the man but shook too hard to grasp the flaccid leather.

She said, “This is absurd. What you’re doing is some sort of racial profiling. I’ve seen stories about this on Dateline but never in a million years though they were true.”

Again the herbalist raised the volume knob on his television. On the soap a man and woman argued about something while they stood in a living room. He paced. She clutched her hands. A man in the next room pressed his ear to the wall to listen. Tabitha was surprised Chinese people sat on the same kind of couch as American people. They decorate with coordinated lamps and matching side tables.

“If you think I’m just another rich bitch looking for herbs to lose weight, you are totally wrong. What happened to all the supposed “Oriental wisdom” I’ve heard about, whether or not I’m supposed to mention it. And how do you know there’s a doll in my purse?”

Tabitha spoke at the man but stood transfixed by the television, the in flagrante delicto the Chinese soap star with his ear pressed to the wall heard in silent recrimination, all the ensuing tragedy; the couple breaking up and getting back together only to shatter apart again as if each character she watched was formed from bisque.

She stammered towards the man after forcing her eyes away from the set, “Whether or not I am supposed to say so, I’m not seeing any of the “Chinese magic” white people have heard about since birth.”

“You were born with the wrong hands. See how you never take your gloves off, even inside. The only thing left to do is to cut them off,” the man said. He turned his

television so high Tabitha heard a palpable static arc between the two lovers. The actor on the other side of the wall seemed unaffected.

“Cut them off? Either you are really sick or we are experiencing a deep cultural divide.”

The torn leather finger lounged in Tabitha’s coat pocket. She now felt positive the herbalist knew about the severed finger, guessed at the sharpness of her incisors and also a large enough bank account to afford many more pairs.

The man said, “You need to find the person who has your hands. She will need to cut hers off, too. Then you exchange and everyone is happy. Find a doctor to do it. Obamacare.”

Tabitha turned to leave the store.

“And here,” the man handed her a small pocketknife, “this is for her.”

He pointed to Tabitha’s handbag.

So many herbs crowded the shelves around the front counter and hanged in dried bundles from every alcove Tabitha didn’t notice the store also sold cheap looking knives and watches. The store smelled like a bakery more than a medicine cabinet. As Tabitha exited onto a Chinatown sidewalk, the pocketknife carrying on an affair with the red leather finger shoved deep in her coat pocket, the doll in her purse oblivious to the encounter, she felt silly thinking spices, or a man who sold cheap cutlery, could change her fate.

She walked away from Chinatown as the city’s meager December sun set behind a curve of buildings. Her husband was stuck at work in an office far away from downtown making spreadsheets and collecting numbers. This gave Tabitha a little bonus

time to haunt her favorite store. On days when she felt especially out of sorts, the relationship between her and her hands strained to the point of wanting to wear gloves even when she stayed home, Tabitha bought a doll from a store that sold dolls and antiques, an obligatory combination for wealthy city women who acquired both old dolls and the old furniture to set them on.

Each choice of a new doll felt right to her at the time, almost as if their inaudible inner lives connected on some special frequency in Tabitha's brain. Today's doll had shone beneath a track light off to the side of the store's main window display. The doll was not an angel or a showstopper, did not wear a fancy dress, a seasonal halo. Her peach colored lips wore no lipstick. But her hands! Perfect creamy seashells Tabitha cupped over her own much larger ears as she exited the store in a wet bluster.

She never named her dolls or made up a convoluted doll history. They did not have books written about them, complete with matching outfits. Her dolls were not born in a cabbage patch. Sometimes she read her dolls a passage or two from Tom Whalen's book, *Dolls*, the small volume she always carried with her. She read somewhere that the author lived in Germany, which to her seemed about as exotic as living on the moon. He understood dolls better than anyone besides her mother, who claimed intimate knowledge of most dolls' inner psyches. Someday she hoped to visit Mr. Whalen. First she needed miniature doll passports and a doll travel wardrobe and maybe even doll vaccines...

Tabitha tucked her new doll, half the height of Barbie and with a topknot of brown embroidery floss hair, into her pocket with the busted finger and the knife.

"Cut off my hands and trade them with someone else? Can you imagine! I should report that man to the Better Business Bureau and the cops," Tabitha spoke towards her

pocket. (It wasn't like she forgot to acknowledge the doll who lay content in the bottom of her purse amid stale cookie crumbs and a peppermint wrapper. When a new doll came into the picture the old doll knew to keep her distance.)

Happy hour approached around the corner from the antique store in the form of a tiki bar. Tabitha requested a cozy table for two near the window.

"Will you be meeting someone else?" the hostess asked as Tabitha removed her coat.

She unwrapped her new doll from its tissue paper and placed the doll, in a sitting position, on the table next to a tiki candle.

"I'll have what the silver fox on Mad Men ordered in that one episode," she told the woman, who dressed in Polynesian cocktail attire. "Crabs Rangoon or something. And my new friend here will have a Queen Charlotte Fruit Punch."

She pointed to the doll, who stared straight ahead as it crowded the space between the tiki candle and Tabitha's placemat. The woman wrote down the order without looking up.

Under the glow of yellow tea lights Tabitha ate her appetizer. Spicy catsup wicked off her leather fingers. She left her gloves on. Her new doll did not come with gloves.

"So be careful with your punch, okay? Be sure all that pineapple juice doesn't go to your head."

A table of twenty-something's drinking Mai-Tais stared at Tabitha and her dining companion while the young women collectively sucked the rum out of their lime garnishes.

“Look at her,” she heard one woman say. “What a freak. Where’s her missing glove finger and what’s with her date?”

“Audrina be nice. Come on,” said another voice in an indiscernible sea of blonde highlights.

“Yeah. Total freak,” another woman answered.

“Yeah but you can tell she used to be pretty,” the same kind voice spoke out of the rum-drunk crowd.

“Maybe,” another said, “before she became certifiable.”

“Don’t you listen to them,” Tabitha said to her doll. “Just enjoy your pineapple punch while this unsavory element gets too tipsy to act anything close to elegant.”

“Freak!” another woman at the table yelled towards Tabitha.

“No, Dolly, no. You can’t do that. Or that. No. Like I said before just ignore them. No. And you most definitely cannot do anything close to that,” Tabitha said as she wiped spicy mustard off her new doll’s petite calico sleeve.

Things had changed since Tabitha moved to the city two decades ago to be closer to all the psychics. Back then young women respected the misunderstood, yet tolerated and sometimes even revered, eccentricities of older women. As she sucked the crab from her last deep-fried wanton, unconcerned whether fishy grease splattered her gloves when she fed her doll the tiny, most tender final morsel, she remembered the Grand Dame of the Bijou Café. When Tabitha first moved to town she ate every breakfast at the café, decorated to look like something from a very American version of Paris. The woman, who Tabitha could never take her eyes off, carried a stuffed dog with her each time she went to the Bijou. A man always trailed behind her with a rhinestone rimmed dog dish he

filled with ice water to place in front of the stuffed animal. As breakfast lengthened to brunch, the woman chewing dainty mouthfuls of bacon and eggs, her companion would refill the dog dish over and over without any hint of embarrassment as he summoned the closest waiter. Tabitha still recalled a feeling of jealousy. She had never been loved the way that man loved that woman. Not even by her dolls.

She stood up, positioned her new doll in the crook of her folded arm and walked over to the giggling group.

“I think all of you need to learn to respect those who are different from you.”

The young women took pictures of Tabitha and her doll with their iPhones.

One of the more vocal women said, “I’m gonna tweet this to the Tonight Show and hope someone reads my caption on-air.”

“Yeah totally.”

“Yeah, me too!”

A woman in the center of the group put her phone away without taking one picture. Tabitha stared at the woman’s hands, her classic French manicure while all the other girls her age Instagrammed those awful colored tips. She felt such a recognition zip along her nerves she almost dropped her doll on the floor.

“Excuse me, miss,” she said to the girl, who left money on the table for her drink before grabbing her bag. She got up from the table to leave. “I, I think you may have my hands which means I, in fact, must have yours?”

The woman exited the tiki bar without saying goodbye to her friends. She never looked back at the woman who held onto a tiny doll.

Of course Tabitha followed her into the streets, nighttime descending but still bright from lights that reflected their yellows and blues in the city's habitual puddles of rain.

"Excuse me, miss!" Tabitha yelled towards the young woman as the doll jostled in the crook of her arm. "If you'll just stop for a moment what I have to tell you might change the course of your entire life."

The woman hopped onto an approaching streetcar, a car Tabitha missed by the final closing of its door even though she begged the other passengers to hold the door for her, and disappeared towards uncountable rows of apartments. Her stomach quaked with an unease she hadn't felt since the time, all those years ago, her first psychic told her about the mix-up with her palms. She sat on the bench next to the streetcar line to wait for the next car heading in the direction of the woman's apartment though she knew she would never find the woman who possessed her hands.

Tabitha sat on the bench for hours as streetcar after streetcar passed her bench. She decided that she didn't mind the smell of moist air so much, or the way her one finger felt almost too cold when a drop of rain burrowed towards the weakness of exposed flesh. She removed the chewed-off finger from her pocket and flung the red leather into the nearest puddle. It floated on top like a stitch.

The pocketknife and doll she removed from her coat in one graceful swoop, naked finger and all. It was more difficult than she thought, steadying the little knife in such a small but perfect hand. White shards of bisque nicked away from her doll's right hand as the blade made its first quick slash. She told the crowd gathering across the street to give



her and her friend some privacy. Reinventing one's self, one cut at a time, required more respect than waiting on a curb to see what happens next.