

Whispers in the Dark

“Shit,” Lexi cursed, looking from side to side for witnesses. The hallway was deserted except for a cockroach that had to be at least the size of her thumb. Lexi’s back protested as she bent down to retrieve her fallen keys. She slid the key into the lock, grimacing as the sound of the turning deadbolt echoed loudly in the empty space. The door moaned as she pushed it open. She would have to buy lubricant if she ever got around to going to the store.

The apartment had been considered posh when the building was first built. However, time and revolving tenants had taken its toll on the place. The wood floors were worn and faded, the polish long gone from decades of harsh chemicals. The walls were dingy with tar stains that bled through the white paint. It wasn’t much to look at, but it was the cheapest she could find close enough to the hospital. With her crazy schedule it wasn’t like she was there much anyway. Why should she care that the kitchen countertops had seen better days so long as there was enough space for her coffee pot?

Lexi trudged tiredly through the apartment, yelping in pain when she hit her shin on the cardboard box that served as her coffee table. She had been living in the apartment for four months already, but she still hadn’t gotten around to unpacking everything, or purchasing grown-up furniture, for that matter. She limped her way toward her bedroom—using the minimal moonlight that shone through the windows to navigate the labyrinth of boxes and bags. Maybe if she ever got a weekend off, she would finally unpack.

The twenty-seven-year-old had graduated from medical school in the top five percent of her class and, as such, had pretty much had her pick of residency programs. Rather than stay close to home in North Carolina, she had applied at several larger hospitals in the hopes of expanding her horizons. Her aunt hadn’t been too thrilled when Lexi told her she was moving to

Chicago. Despite being warned of the high crime rate associated with the bigger city, Lexi was set on going—no matter how fervently the older woman had advised against it.

She was beginning to think Aunt Betsy had been right.

Lexi had been on day rotation at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for the last several days, and, in that time, she had treated twelve gunshot wounds and fifteen stab wounds, lost five patients to gang violence, and examined eleven patients from violent sexual assaults. Chicago was known for its violence for a reason. She hadn't really given it too much thought before it had become a constant in her life.

That day, however, had been particularly awful; it always was when children were involved. A whole family had come in through the ER, all with gunshot wounds. The father had come in with a police escort and a missing ear. It seemed that he was going to be arrested for some crime or other and had decided that instead of being taken in by the police, he would take his family hostage. He had intended murder/suicide, but the police had startled him when he tried to turn the gun on himself, causing the bullet to destroy his ear. The mother had been DOA, having succumbed to her chest wound enroute. The 10-year-old twin girls had nearly matching gut shots. They had only been able to save one of the twins.

Lexi groaned as she tossed her duffel bag on the floor next to the bed and fell, still fully clothed, onto her bed. Pressing the toe of one white sneaker into the heel of the other, she managed to release one of her feet from its prison. One more push on the opposite heel freed her other foot. The sweet release was almost enough to make her cry out in relief, and she might have if it hadn't been for the throbbing that followed the momentary bliss. She really needed to try out the insole finder machine at the store... if she ever got around to going.

A small bell jingled somewhere near the bed and Lexi felt something furry rubbing against the tops of her dangling feet. There was a sudden weight on her back and the sensation of small paws making their way up her back made her smile despite her exhaustion.

“Hey, Yang,” Lexi cooed at her cat as he rubbed his face on the back of her head. “Did you miss me, buddy?”

The white and black cat purred as he settled down beside her. Sometimes Lexi swore he understood her completely, especially times like these when he seemed to know she needed his company. She had thought that being away from home would be exciting, but it had ended up just being lonely. If it weren't for Yang, she wouldn't have any friends. Hell, she hadn't really had time to make any. Her life consisted of work and sleep.

Lexi begrudgingly got up to change out of her street clothes. She debated briefly over whether or not to dig through the unfolded laundry in the basket for pajamas. Ultimately, she climbed under the covers pajamaless. She didn't even have to call the cat; he had moved to his usual spot as soon as she'd lay down.

“G'night, Yangie-boy,” Lexi bid, yawning as Yang's rhythmic breathing next to her lulled her to sleep.

Lexi woke up cold and disoriented. The room was dark. The only light was the dim haze from streetlamps filtering in through thin, red curtains—creating an eerie aura. She wasn't sure what had awoken her, but, as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, a sound seemed to creep out from the cracks between the floorboards and in the walls.

It was a low hiss at first, barely noticeable above the hum of the heater, but it gradually got louder and more defined. It rose to a whisper, and she began to pick up on what sounded like words and bits of a conversation.

... stay away... won't hurt... would never... ever again...

At first, she tried to ignore it, assuming it must be someone in one of the adjacent apartments. The walls were rather thin, after all. However, the whispers just continued to get louder, repeating and growing until it was like someone was in the room with her, whispering with others.

Stay away from me... Please.

I told you before, I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you.

He won't hurt you ever again.

Should she call the police? But what would she tell them? That she heard voices? They would think she was crazy. *Chances are, it's just the neighbor's television*, she reassured herself.

Lexi looked at her nightstand clock. It was four in the morning. She needed more rest. She had to make the most of her days off if she was going to make it through her residency. The noise had stopped sometime after she'd looked at the time, so she turned over and tried to fall back asleep. It took her a while, but she managed to drift into a fitful sleep filled with vague images washed in red.

Lexi groaned as her alarm buzzed from her nightstand. She felt like she had been put through a grinder. It had been two months since the whispers had begun. At first, she had been able to brush it off as something from one of her neighbors' apartments, but the second and third times were harder to explain away. The conversation grew every time and, as more was revealed, she became more uncomfortable. At this point, she had heard them twenty-five nights and they

were becoming more frequent. In fact, she hadn't slept through the night for a week, and when she did sleep, she had unsettling dreams.

Last night's dream had been the most upsetting yet. A girl cowered in the corner of the room as a man approached her. There was a struggle, and then there was blood. Bright red splattered the walls and puddled in the floor. At the end, a figure with a bloody knife stood over the man lying on the floor, in the middle of it all. Lexi hadn't been able to make out the girl's or the man's features, but the figure at the end was all cruelly satisfied smiles and hollow eyes, and that was what disturbed her the most.

Lexi rolled over to cuddle with Yang for a few minutes before she had to get up. The cat purred in her arms, momentarily content with receiving her affection. She had begun to drift back to sleep when her ringtone blared from her phone's speakers. She thought about letting it go to voicemail, but when she looked at the caller ID, she knew she couldn't. Her aunt would just continue to call until she answered. Clearing her throat, she swiped right.

"Hey, Aunt Betsy," Lexi greeted, attempting to sound cheerful.

"You sound awful," Aunt Betsy said, a hint of worry apparent in her voice even over the phone. *"Are you sick? Do I need to fly up there and make you some of my chicken noodle soup?"*

Lexi thought of the empty take out containers and pizza boxes that cluttered her countertop. Her cooking skills consisted of reheating fried rice and microwaving ramen noodles. She missed her aunt's cooking. She could almost taste the salty goodness of the homemade broth and the sweetness of the chopped carrots in that soup. It was tempting to agree to let her aunt come take care of her, but Lexi knew she couldn't do that. Her aunt had looked after her for over fifteen years. It was time for her to be independent.

"I'm ok, just tired," she sighed. "I knew it'd be like this when I started Med school."

"But still," Aunt Betsy cautioned, "you need to take care of your health. You know how you get."

"I know, Aunt Betsy," Lexi replied, her voice tight as she absentmindedly scratched behind Yang's ears. The feline pushed his head further into her hand and some of the tension left her body. She knew her aunt was coming from a place of concern, but Lexi still felt the implication that she was deficient in some way.

"If you're really stressed, maybe you could find a good therapist there," the elder continued. *"I'm sure Dr. Shelley would fax your records over. She helped you so much after... well, you know..."*

Aunt Betsy trailed off. She always avoided talking about what had happened to Lexi's parents. Lexi never understood why she was so hesitant. People have car accidents every day. In fact, she saw at least five on a good day in the ER.

"Really, I'm ok," Lexi assured her.

"Well, you might oughtta try to make some friends," Aunt Betsy suggested. *"You keep to yourself way too much."*

"I don't really have time for friends, but Yang keeps me company." Lexi smiled as she ran her hand along the cat's back.

"Well, if you need anything, you be sure to call me," her aunt insisted. Lexi could clearly picture the pout the woman was likely sporting.

"Ok, I will," Lexi agreed. Yang jumped down from the bed and meowed loudly, pacing from the bed to the door and back. "Well, I gotta go. Yang is hungry, and he ain't gonna shut up until I feed him."

They said their goodbyes and Lexi ended the call. She stretched before swinging her legs out from under the covers and standing up, wincing as her bare feet touched the frigid floor. Following the cat to the kitchen, she set about filling his bowls and starting a pot of coffee. She wasn't really hungry, but she had a long shift that day and would need energy. She poured a bowl of cereal, grimacing as she forced herself to eat the sugarcoated cardboard. Even her coffee tasted off.

Lexi blinked as she got off the bus in front of the hospital. Where had the time gone and how did she get there? She had been on autopilot most of the morning, not even registering the clothes she'd grabbed from the basket. She'd wandered all the way to the bus stop without really seeing her surroundings.

She had started losing periods of time. At first, the gaps had been tiny, several minutes here and there. She'd brushed it off as the lack of sleep catching up to her since she still hadn't been sleeping well. The voices and dreams plagued her to the point where she was afraid to stay awake, but she feared the nightmares more. Recently, the gaps had gotten longer, spanning up to a couple of hours. She would zone out at one place and find herself somewhere completely different or doing something random.

It scared her, to say the least. What if she were to zone out at work? Or walk out into traffic? She had to do something, but seeing a psychiatrist was out of the question. Rumors travelled fast. Her residency program was extremely competitive. If she were to show a weakness like that, the other residents would jump at the chance to thin the herd.

If I could just get some decent sleep and settle all my sleep debt... Lexi's eyes fell on the locked medicine cabinet. It seemed to glow, as if it held the answers to all her problems. Of all

the medications in it, there had to be something that would knock her out. The over-the-counter stuff hadn't helped, but hospital strength stuff might. Tomorrow was her day off so she could sleep all day and come back to work refreshed and sane. *Just one dose won't be missed, right?*

Lexi yawned and stretched. Glancing at her alarm clock, she smiled. It seemed that the Triazolam had done its job. She felt better than she had in months and had slept for sixteen hours. She was still a little foggy, but she was sure it would go away once she started moving around.

She had been nervous about stealing the medicine, but now she knew that she'd done the right thing. She was a doctor, after all. Why shouldn't she be able to fix herself? Don't her patients deserve to be seen by someone capable of doing what it takes to solve a problem?

Lexi walked into the kitchen, the fog dissipating more with every step. She looked around, wondering what was missing. As her eyes fell on the cat food in the corner, she realized what it was. She hadn't seen Yang since she'd woke up.

"Yang?" she called out in a singsong voice. The cat had been in bed with her when she'd fallen asleep. Usually, he would insist on being fed as soon as she woke up. She poured a cup of food into his empty bowl, hoping that the sound would bring him running. "Yangie-boy? Come out kitty, kitty."

Nothing. Lexi scratched her head and tried looking in the living room. The apartment had plenty of places for a cat to hide. There were boxes sitting around. Maybe he had fallen asleep in one of them. She checked all of them, even the ones that were still taped shut, but there was still no sign of Yang. She checked the front door and the windows, in case they had been left open and he'd escaped, but they were all locked tight.

She had checked every nook and cranny she could think of. She looked in closets, in cabinets, and under the bed, but the cat wasn't in any of those places. There was only one place else to look. The only reason she hadn't checked the bathroom before was that Yang never went in there. He associated it with baths, and he hated them with every fiber of his being. Still, she had exhausted every other possibility.

As soon as she got to the closed door, she knew something was off. There were no desperate meows coming from the other side of the door, no frantic scratches, only a slight metallic scent. Dread washed over Lexi as she reached for the handle. Whatever she was about to find, she knew it wouldn't be good. Swallowing the lump in her throat and closing her eyes, she slowly turned the handle and the door creaked open.

That wet iron smell she'd associated with blood bags washed over her, bidding her to stay away. She knew she had to look, even if she didn't want to. Lexi tried not to breathe too deeply as she stepped forward into the bathroom and opened her eyes. She couldn't hold back the scream that forced its way from inside her.

There, on the shower tile, were two words scrawled in red, dripping letters.

Hi Lexi

Once she regained her faculties, Lexi rushed forward toward the bathtub, nearly slipping on a streak of blood in her haste. She knew what she would find, but she hoped she wouldn't.

"Yang!" she wailed as she saw mangled pink and black fur floating in red-tinted water. There was a pair of bloody handprints on the edge of the tub and bloody scissors lay nearby. "My poor baby. Who did this to you?"

She was about to reach in and grab her murdered pet, when banging on the front door stopped her. *Who could that be?* What if it was whoever killed Yang returning to finish her off too? Or what if the hospital had actually missed that dose of sleeping pills and called the police?

Scenario after scenario raced through her mind as she made her way to the door. They were still knocking. She checked the peephole. A lanky man with glasses came into view. She had seen him briefly before, bringing bags of groceries to the octogenarian next door. He must have heard her scream and come to investigate. Lexi opened the door just enough for her body to block the way in, leaving the man's fist hovering in the air, knocking on nothing.

"I'm Tom from next door. Are'ya ok?" the man asked, peering through the crack at her. "I heard a scream."

"Yeah, I, uh, that was me," Lexi replied. "I was watchin' a horror movie. I'm not too good with jump-scares."

She must have looked a mess because Tom squinted his eyes, as if studying her for any indication of a lie. Lexi held her breath and tried to seem in control of herself, even though her heart was pounding. He seemed satisfied with her answer until he looked down at her feet.

"Miss, you're bleedin' on da floor," Tom said, pointing to her bloody footprints. She looked down, momentarily letting go of the door. It was long enough for him to push it further open and start following the footprints toward the bathroom. "I'm an EMT. Where d'ya keep your first aid kit?"

"That's not necessary! I'm a doctor, I can patch myself up," Lexi insisted, running after him to try to cut him off before he reached his destination. But his long legs covered more distance than her shorter ones.

“What da fuck?!” Tom exclaimed as he entered the bathroom. “What kinda sicko are’ya?”

Damn thin walls and noseey neighbors! What if he calls the cops and they find the medicine and think I did this? Lexi’s mind swam, panic overtaking her senses as Tom continued to interrogate her about the dead cat. Then she stilled when she heard it, a familiar whisper.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you, just like I always have.”

Blood.

Lexi looked around in horror at her once white bathroom. There was blood everywhere. There were sprays of it on the shower curtain, puddles on the linoleum, and smears of it down the walls in the shape of fingers leading down to where Tom lay, still and open-eyed on his stomach with blood seeping from his back and temple.

She clenched her hands into fists, only to realize that one of them held the pair of scissors. Her hands were covered in sticky, cooling blood all the way up to her elbows. Shocked, she released the weapon, allowing it to fall to the floor with a clink. She backed away from Tom’s body. She turned to leave the bathroom, but something caught her eye.

From the mirror, hollow eyes and a satisfied smile stared back at her. And yet, it looked a lot like her.

“He can’t hurt you now. I told you I would take care of you,” the doppelgänger whispered, *“just like I did back then.”*

“What are you talking about? Who are you?” Lexi asked, trembling.

“That asshole wasn’t satisfied with your mother. No, he was always coming to you once she was asleep. But I took care of him for you,” it responded.

“My parents died in a car crash. Aunt Betsy said-” she began.

“Aunt Betsy is a liar. She never told you because she thought you were weak. That’s why she didn’t want you to leave her side,” the doppelgänger scoffed.

Deep down, she knew. Somehow, she had always known. Bits of memories flashed through Lexi’s mind. Her stepfather’s late-night visits, the blood on her then smaller hands, her mother being led away in handcuffs as she told Lexi it would all be ok, it all started to come back. Everything she had forgotten or locked away came rushing in like flood waters breaking a levee.

And Yang, poor Yang, was among them. The horrible things she had done to him. The cat had hissed and struggled as she grabbed him by the nape of his neck and held him under water until he stopped moving. She had dragged him out of the tub and carved him up on the bathroom floor using the shears she had bought for trimming her bangs. How could such a small thing bleed so much?

“Oh, now you remember,” the mirror image remarked wryly. *“To think, all this time I just had to get rid of that stupid cat.”*

“What did Yang do to deserve that?” she cried.

“He got in the way of us,” the copy retorted. Lexi could feel the underlying anger. *“After everything I did for you, you forgot me. You put me in a box and never let me out!”*

“You said you would take care of me, but you killed my only friend!” Lexi yelled, her body shaking as she white-knuckled the sides of the sink. “I don’t need you! So, just fuck off!”

“I’m not going back in, Goddamnit. I’m here to stay,” it seethed. *“You can go in the box this time.”*

Lexi felt a push at the edge of her consciousness, and her vision blurred.

“You should have stayed gone!” she said, resisting the urge to give into the pressure behind her eyes.

“Ungrateful little bitch,” the doppelgänger sneered. *“That man was right about one thing. Your body is the only useful thing about you.”*

Lexi felt like she had been kicked in the gut. Now that she had remembered, she couldn't forget the way he had made her feel worthless and dirty. She couldn't forget how she'd spend an hour in the shower after every visit, scrubbing her skin raw. Her skin itched at the memory. She closed her eyes and swallowed down bile.

“You know, I think I deserve to have some fun,” it continued, its tone changing to gleeful. *“That old lady next door might miss that lump over there. I think I'll start with her.”*

“No!” Lexi yelled, her eyes popping open wide. She couldn't let that happen. That thing needed her body to do anything. She frantically scanned the room for a weapon. Her eyes landed on the scissors.

“What are you doing?!” the doppelgänger screeched. *“No, put those down!”*

“I am ending this once and for all,” Lexi said. She took a deep breath and plunged the scissors deep into her neck, severing her carotid artery. She fell to the floor, her vision tunneling. Warm blood poured down her chest, but she was cold. *I'm sorry, Yang.*

The apartment was left silent.