

BY THE TIME the boy in ward four attacked me, I'd already nicknamed him The Lost One in my head. He'd been admitted a week ago, transferred from police to orderlies while dozens of reporters swarmed the entrance, overwhelming security in their struggle to get a clear shot of our newest, involuntary patient. Inside, he'd put up such a fight that three men had to hold him down while they administered sedatives and brought him straight into isolation. The boy who came back from the dead, the newscasters called him. The picture they flashed, the only one they'd gotten before he'd become a violent blur, showed a sunburned, lean face and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. His eyes were a ghostly blue, the kind of eyes songs get written about.

Ward four wasn't on my rotation so I didn't see him after that, but I heard about him everywhere. Cashiers at the gas station chewed on their theories. Newspaper editorialists speculated on

MINDY MEJIA

worst case scenarios, calling him a savage and a murderer. The fascination bled into the Internet, where social media accounts popped up overnight. A fake Twitter handle had already gotten ten thousand followers, someone on Snapchat made him a Bitmoji avatar, and countless people on Facebook filled his timeline with unanswered questions. The entire city of Duluth was obsessed with him; I could practically feel thousands of eyes gazing up the hill toward Congdon Psychiatric Facility, trying to peer inside these old, brick walls.

A few days after his admission Dr. Mehta called me into her office. I was the assistant speech therapist on staff, my shiny, new title after earning my graduate degree from the University of Minnesota and getting promoted from orderly. It still hadn't sunk in, even five months later. Every time I put a note on a patient's record, my signature line popped up, startling me, like I was impersonating someone whose comments mattered. Me, Maya Stark, the recalcitrant kid who was suspended from high school, a professional therapist? I looked like I belonged on the opposite side of the couch. I was the maroon-haired punk girl who ran her German shepherd along the lake walk, making all the tourists snatch their kids out of harm's way. Yet here I was. Twenty-three years old and called in by the head psychiatrist to work with the most famous patient we'd ever had.

"I can't tell if he understands us or not," Dr. Mehta said, pacing behind her desk in a swirl of sari fabric. For a shrink, she rarely sat down. She also lint-rolled herself a lot because her wife fostered cats, like an illegal amount of them. "Understands the diction, that is. He knows perfectly well we're trying to communicate with him and he wants nothing to do with us."

Dr. Mehta was young, at least for being the senior psychiatrist

LEAVE NO TRACE

in charge of an entire mental health facility. She'd made a name for herself authoring papers and conducting studies on the harmful effects of physical restraints and isolation on patients. The key to recovery, she proposed, was enabling the patient's sense of autonomy within a group dynamic. Treating them like humans. Imagine that.

"Are flashcards okay?" I figured I'd start slow.

Dr. Mehta nodded and sighed, pausing to stare at the blanks in the record on her computer. "We're looking for any response at this point. Anything at all."

I waited until after the dinner rounds were finished, when stomachs were full and the wind murmured invitations against the dark windows. This was the loneliest time of day, when you let yourself wish there was someone to talk to.

A veteran orderly named Stan admitted me into the locked outer doors of ward four and walked me down the linoleum hallway lined with isolation rooms on either side. A few patients stared at us through the windows. One was banging his fist dully on the glass, but the rest sat on their beds or paced. I counted eight in total, eight patients who weighed more than they knew. All of them pressed on Dr. Mehta's conscience until she could get them safely reintegrated into the common wards.

"I don't think you're gonna have any luck with him," Stan said, keys jingling at his hip. "He's completely ignored everyone who's gone in there except Carol."

Carol Kelley was the seventy-year-old kitchen attendant who brought meals to all the isolation patients. She clipped herbs from her own garden to garnish the mush and served it like she was having Sunday dinner with friends around her kitchen table. Everybody loved Carol, even the sociopaths.

MINDY MEJIA

“What does he do?”

“Examines things—his clothes, the mattress. Feels the walls. Likes to drag the bed over to the window so he can see out. Stands there pressing the glass. Sometimes it looks like he’s trying to break the whole damn thing.”

“Does he eat?”

“Some.”

“Any response to his name?”

“Huh. Like a wall, that one.”

Lucas was his name. Lucas Blackthorn. He’d been arrested for breaking and entering at an outfitter’s store, attempted robbery of the store, and two counts of aggravated assault on the owners who’d caught him in the act.

Stan paused outside the room. “I’ll be right here at the window.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“That’s why I’m standing outside the door, and not between you and Tarzan.”

Some of the orderlies resented my promotion, my leap from a blue-collar hourly wage into the hallowed ranks of the salaried, but not Stan. He gave me a grin, unlocked the door with a metal creak, and waved me inside. I stepped in and waited for it to shut behind me before looking up.

The patient faced the back of the room with his hands on the cement block wall in a push-up position. From the way he stood with his shoulders tensed and legs braced it looked like he was trying to move the entire wall. I took a step closer and noticed his hospital shirt was torn at the bottom and he’d used the missing strip to tie his hair back.

“Hello, Lucas.”

LEAVE NO TRACE

He remained still for a second, but then surprised me by turning his head. I saw his face in person for the first time.

He wasn't a boy.

My brain stuttered on that one thought for what felt like a stupidly long time as our eyes met and held. Why did all the media keep calling him a boy? Lucas Blackthorn looked at least as old as me and stood a foot taller. His cheeks were hollow and shaded with the beginning of a beard. His skin was a deep reddish tan, not the pasty white of most of our long-term patients, and his eyes conveyed things that no first session speech therapy could have drawn out: intelligence and caution mixed with undisguised curiosity.

Moving slowly and deliberately, I walked to the bare mattress between us. There was no table, so we'd have to start the flashcards on the bed. He watched my progress, studying my hair. The short, pixie-cut combined with its dyed color grabbed a lot of patients' attention. One of the men in ward two, a lifer named Big George with a traumatic brain injury, even liked to touch the ends of it that swished in front of my ears. I made sure he stuck to the left side so he didn't get distracted by the tiny silver hoop earrings along my right ear. Lucas noticed those, too. I watched him catalog every part of me, absorbing the appearance of this newcomer to his room, like someone would analyze a newly discovered insect. His gaze paused on the blue fabric bag I carried, his expression unreadable now.

I put a hand on my chest and waited until his attention snapped back to my face.

"I'm Maya." Three syllables. Slow rate, distinct pronunciation. I didn't smile. I'd never trusted strangers who smiled at me—they always wanted something.

MINDY MEJIA

Patting the place where my pulse beat too fast, I nodded and said it again. “Maya.”

He swiveled back toward the wall, dismissing the insect. I glanced behind me where Stan was shaking his head through the lead glass. Shrugging, I started to pull out the flashcards when suddenly Stan’s face changed. His eyes widened and his mouth opened in a warning I couldn’t hear.

I hesitated and before I could turn around, a giant force threw me into the wall and something was being looped around my neck. The metal door shrieked as Stan wrenched it open and I was pulled back, my body turned into a human shield. The thing around my neck tightened and I panicked, unable to breathe. Lucas had my arms locked behind me in an impossibly strong grip. I fought against it, desperate to free myself.

“Keys,” he said in a hoarse voice. I bowed my body against his, trying to find some slack in the cord around my throat, but met only a column of unyielding muscle. If anything, the cord grew tighter.

My vision started to contract, black creeping in at the edges. I kicked viciously, striking his shins so hard they should have snapped in half, and used the rest of my oxygen in the process. The last thing I saw before everything went dark was Stan’s hand, holding out his ring of keys.

I came to on the floor in a gasping, head-pounding mess. Stan lay next to the door, unconscious, and Lucas Blackthorn was gone.

“Agghhh.” I grabbed my head and waited for the air to work its way back through my body. When I could get up, I crawled over to

LEAVE NO TRACE

check Stan's pulse and saw blood trickling down from his hairline. He was alive.

A noise came from the hallway. Lots of noises, as my ears started registering them.

I peeked out and saw patients at their isolation windows, banging and shouting. Farther down the hall, it became obvious what they were excited about: Lucas Blackthorn, trying to find the right key to get through the second set of doors.

Without any conscious thought, I slipped Stan's baton from his belt and darted down the hallway with Lucas's back the only thing in focus, my progress muffled by the noise from the other patients. At Stan's station I tripped the emergency security button and lifted the baton. He was only a few feet away now, punching key after key into the old locks, oblivious to the electronic security square mounted above.

I waited, willing myself to breathe quietly while eyeing his upper arms, his thighs, the major muscle groups I could aim for without causing unnecessary injury. He couldn't have more than twenty pounds on me. Thirty, tops. My fingers flexed over the baton while I mentally traced the route from the front desk to this ward, counting the seconds until backup arrived. Then he flipped the keys over and found the badge, Stan's security badge, which he stared at for a split second before pressing it to the door, making it beep and flash green. I didn't hesitate this time. As soon as I heard the locks disengage, I swung the baton into his leg.

He stumbled into the outer hallway, still on his feet, and started to run for the exit at the end of the corridor. I launched myself at him, jumping on his back and sending us both crashing into the wall and rolling to the floor.

MINDY MEJIA

He scrambled to get up and I didn't care how famous he was, I didn't care if he was lost; there was no way this guy was escaping on my watch. I hooked my legs around his and locked the baton across his chest, trying to pin his arms. Shaking my hold, he flipped us both to our backs, crushing me underneath him, and grabbed for the baton.

Voices and footfalls thundered toward us.

"A little help," I yelled and immediately regretted it. The words were like fire racing through my bruised throat, and I couldn't help the moan that followed them. At my sound of pain, he released his grip on the baton and fell inexplicably still. We both paused in that crazy position—like a piggy-back ride tipped on its back—before his weight disappeared, lifted off me by the cavalry of orderlies and security staff.

"Stan!" I waved some of them toward the ward entrance, before being seized by a fit of coughing.

Automatically I covered my throat with my hands, trying to stop the convulsions while the team clamored around, practically tripping over me to secure our wayward patient. Their boots braced and stomped inches from my head, sending vibrations through the linoleum and into my skull, which felt as fragile as an egg on concrete. No one offered to help me up. Their voices sounded far away, eclipsed by the pull and drag of air in my throat, the unsteady rise and fall of my chest. Only the tremor in the floor, the possibility of being trampled, made me turn my head to the side and that's when I saw him watching me.

They'd flipped him on his stomach and pulled his arms behind him. He was putting up no resistance and barely seemed aware of their efforts to subdue him. For a strange, endless moment, our stillness separated us from the rush of legs flooding the corridor,

LEAVE NO TRACE

from the shouts and determination and muscle swarming above. We stared at each other, our faces both resting on the cold, flecked tiles less than three feet apart.

Then a needle flashed in the fluorescent lights, the men picked him up, and Lucas Blackthorn was gone.