

--Prologue--

At 2:33 AM on a starry autumn night, a woman in critical condition was rushed into Mt. Auburn Hospital. She was an Italian woman, with dark brown hair, and slightly tanned skin.

EMTs frantically wheeled her unconscious body through the hallways, while nurses scattered ahead of it, shooing clear the way to the emergency room.

Inside the emergency room, nurses attached oxygen tanks and a heart monitor to the woman's body, while the chief of medicine prepped defibrillator pads.

"Clear!", he yelled, then pressed the pads to her cold chest and blasted her body full of electricity. Each blast jolted her body violently into the air before slamming it back down on the bed. She made no other movement. After each try, he glanced at the heart monitor, only to see it *beeeep* into a flat-line.

It took seven separate failed attempts before he accepted defeat and declared the passing of 26 year-old Alessia Ann Kovellev.

The patient time of death was recorded as 2:42 AM. Cause of death was believed to be excessive alcohol consumption. Blood tests revealed presence of MDMA, commonly known as "ecstasy."

The nurse and orderlies began to disconnect the oxygen tanks and prepare the body-bag for transport to the morgue.

Two minutes later, her eyes opened.

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Alessia clutched the coffee in her hand as if her life depended on it. She staggered out of a Starbucks. The coffee singed her throat as she took her first gulp.

She hoped the caffeine would kick in quicker than usual; otherwise she might just pass out when she reached her desk.

Then again, she thought. *That might not be such a bad thing*. She didn't sleep much these days.

Pausing at a street corner, she caught the sight of a funeral procession crawling its way down the street in front of her. Each car that passed by was marked with the traditional bright orange flag.

What makes me so goddamn special, she thought, taking in the procession for the dead body. *Why do I deserve a second chance?*

What was she doing with her life that was so remarkable, so amazing, that she had to be struck

by a miracle? For what? To stumble down the same streets, half asleep, to the same desk at work, meet the same people every day? To wash, rinse, and repeat? So many people died every day; didn't one of them deserve it?

Or are you trying to bribe me, she thought bitterly. Do you think this makes up for what you did to her?

The final car of the procession passed. She resumed walking down the street, weaving through an army of commuters. She took a last sip of her coffee, which had gotten cold. She chucked it in a trash can before turning the corner towards the skyscraper where she worked.

She saw a man, looked to be in his early 30s, smile flirtatiously at her as she walked past. She couldn't muster up the energy to return the smile.

As she entered the lobby, she thought back to the hushed conversations she'd overheard from the doctor and nurses the other night at the hospital.

“-full recovery”

“-no explanation-”

“-bit of a miracle!”

Not only had her sudden recovery been remarkable, but the chief of medicine had told her she was actually in *better* shape than when she was brought in. Her body was almost revitalized, even traces of her heavy smoking seemed to have been wiped from her lungs completely.

They had wanted to keep her for observation overnight, but she'd refused. She just wanted to leave that damn hospital. Maybe she was just disappointed that she'd woken up at all.

Every so often she would come across a TV show or internet article about people who had miraculous recoveries from near death experiences. Somehow, this felt different to her in her gut. She knew that she'd been *dead* in the fullest sense. She actually *recalled* being dead - a vivid memory of a lifeless lack of feeling, the way that one could *remember* having a foot or arm go numb. You're not feeling anything there, but the lack of feeling is its own sensation.

Alessia flashed her ID card at the security guard and stepped into an elevator. A small crowd piled into the elevator all around her, and she noticed that the man in his early 30s who had smiled at her earlier was one of them. He glanced at her and nodded briefly. No smiles this time. Maybe he'd been dissuaded by her lack of reaction earlier.

The man had a very sharp, defined chin and high cheekbones, with short, messy hair. She guessed he was an Eastern European. He was cute, she admitted, and a few months earlier she might have tried to strike up a conversation, but somehow the idea of passion just left her cold at the moment.

Alessia poked at her Kung Pao Chicken with her fork.

“Are you feelin’ okay, roomie?” Rose asked.

“Just a little tired.”

Rose nodded. She was Alessia’s close friend, and was about two years older. Her tanned skin and black hair gave away her Portuguese heritage. She was shorter and curvier than Alessia. They worked just down the road from each other, and were clumped together in a Chinese joint, waiting for their third friend, who was running late.

“You really shoulda came with us to the movie the other night,” Rose said eyeing the plate of greasy noodles dropped off in front of her. “Colin Farrell was actin’ all hot and dangerous.”

"Colin Farrel's a tool," interjected Gerrod, plopping down in the third chair. "Sorry I'm late."

Gerrod looked very plain that day, dressed in a grey shirt and stone-washed jeans. He was thin and average-looking man, with short brown hair.

"Don't listen to the silly boy," Rose retorted, waving her hands. "No wonder he's single, he hasn't read the 11th commandment."

"And what's that?" Gerrod asked, using his fork to snag a piece of chicken from Alessia's plate.

"Thou shalt not insult Colin Farrell in front of twenty-something women-"

"Psh, what's he got that I don't?" Gerrod asked, forking a piece of broccoli from Rose's plate.

“Looks?” Rose offered.

“Money?” chimed in Alessia.

“He can afford to order his own food at restaurants,” Rose laughed, shooin’ Gerrod’s hand away from her plate.

"Hey, gimme a break, I'm a starving artist," he protested.

Rose rolled her eyes.

"So anyways, how you doin’ Alessia?" Gerrod asked. "You don't look so bad for someone who just came back from a near-death experience."

Not near-death, she thought. Death.

She wondered why everybody seemed to rationalize her passing as near death, as if they couldn't wrap their brains around the idea that she might have died.

"Well thanks, you don't look so bad yourself for someone who just lost 200 lbs," she asked, changing the subject. Gerrod shared a name with the guy from the Subway commercials, a fact that she and Rose took great delight in reminding him of. She was in no mood to joke, but somehow felt obligated to act 'cheery' and not bring the mood down for everyone else. "You hold the mayo on all those subs?"

"Yup, and not just the mayo, I held the cheese, sauce, and hell, the meat too," He tried to flag a waiter who seemed to be looking in every direction except theirs. "I just ate wheat bread and lettuce for two years straight."

Alessia pushed her plate of half-finished chicken towards him. "Go ahead, I'm not that hungry."

He grinned at her, his eyes lingering on hers for a second, before diving into the plate.

"So what was it like?" Rose asked.

"What?"

"You know, near-death experience and all... what was it like?"

"I..." Alessia trailed off, trying to come up with an answer.

"Did you see a bright white light, or did your whole life flash in front of your eyes?" Gerrod asked softly, gazing longingly at her.

"No," admitted Alessia. "Not my whole life... just certain moments..."

"Like what?" Rose asked, leaning forward slightly.

Talking about it made her squirm. Those certain moments were the reason she wasn't getting any sleep. They were painful and emotional moments from her life, and they appeared in her, as if being played back in a VCR.

"You know, hard moments..." she trailed off, avoiding their eyes. "Mom, break-ups, all that stuff."

She looked away and focused on her drink, signaling to them that this part of the conversation was over.

The phenomenon was disconcerting because they appeared so vividly. The memories were so clear that she could see, smell, and feel everything in detail, even things she never noticed before.

The previous night, a memory of a particularly painful break-up in college had played back in her head. In addition to fresh emotional pain, she recalled the colors on the posters on his dorm wall, and the fact that he had a copy of *Crime and Punishment* sitting next to two Stephen King novels (*Carrie* and *The Stand*) on his bookshelf, and the fact that CNN was on his computer screen. These are all things she didn't even remember noticing at the time.

Each time she relived one of these experiences, the emotional wounds returned as fresh as ever... pain, anger, fear... all of it came back even stronger. She was always confused for a few seconds afterwards, and sometimes even felt like the vision was real and she was waking up in a dream.

In the nothingness of middle Pennsylvania – areas dominated by huge swaths of trees and forests, a lone highway weaved through the darkness. There were no other cars on the road, nor were there any visible cities nearby.

A navy-blue Nissan Altima barreled through the darkness. There were three passengers in the car; a married couple in the front seats, Bill and Lacey, and their 10-year-old daughter, Alessia, in the back-seat.

In the front, Lacey argued with Bill argumentatively, while Bill muttered back under his breath.

Alessia was strapped in the back-seat. She tried to pay attention to what her parents were saying, but exhaustion swept over her little body and her head felt like a fading light bulb. Soon, she fell asleep.

It like only a second had passed when the smoke seeping into her lungs woke her up. The heat of the fire crawled up her skin. She coughed, her eyes filled with tears, obscuring the flashes of orange fire.

She clawed at her seatbelt, but nothing happened. Through the swirling smoke, she caught sight of a figure in the front seat, slumped forward, the brown hair of her head resting against a cracked windshield. It was stained red.

From what she could see out the front windshield, the front of the car was smashed. The hood was perpendicular to the rest of the vehicle, and beyond that were the smoking remains of a red station wagon. A pillar of coal-black smoke shot out from it - visible even in the black night. Fire danced up from the hood.

Within the next moment, she felt the strong hands of a firefighter grab her under her arms, but she barely noticed. She tried to scream out for *mom* but all that came out was a sustained wail.

Alessia's shoulders shook as she quietly sobbed, hunched over her desk in her cube. She looked up, wiping her eyes.

Where am I? she thought to herself, looking around, expecting to see the carnage of the accident's aftermath.

She could still smell the smoke, the ash, and even the vague stench of burning flesh. She fought the urge to vomit. The sudden burst of memory had been so vivid that it took her a second to re-orient herself with where she was at and that she was 26 years old and not 10.

Her heart pounded, and she had the sudden urge to just scream and yell at somebody, *anybody*.

She hauled herself to her feet. She could feel her equilibrium becoming unbalanced. She threw herself out into the hallway, and almost collided with the man who had smiled at her in the elevator.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. She stumbled past him without acknowledgement and flung herself into the women's restroom.

She turned on the faucet and splashed her face with water.

“Why...” she whispered, feeling tears well in her eyes again. Why bring her back to life for *this*, just so she could re-live all her most painful moments in terrifying clarity?

“Why didn't you just let me die!?” she yelled into the mirror, momentarily forgetting where she was.

Because, my dear, I'm in great need of your help.

She gasped, eyes locked on her reflection. Turning quickly, she looked around the bathroom, and leaned down to see if anyone was in the stalls. “Who said that!?”

She could feel her face burning red at the thought of someone having heard her yelling. There was nobody else in the room.

“Who's there!?” she yelled, circling around. She could not remain still, the adrenaline pumped through her. “Who said that!?”

I am sorry, Alessia, I had promised myself I wouldn't speak to you quite yet.....

The voice was not a physical voice, but it was in her head. She was sure of that. But it boomed in there, like a loudspeaker.

...but seeing you in such pain, well... it touched even my jaded heart.

It was a deep and gravelly voice; she guessed male. He was unusually articulate, his enunciation and diction superb, every syllable seemed to be spoken with delicate care. There was a faint accent, something that almost resembled British, but not quite. If she'd heard this voice out of an

actual person, she might think of him as a pretentious professor of some sort.

Just remember, my lady, even the very best of us need help sometimes.

Rays of sunshine careened in different directions as it reflected through the stained glass windows of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The rays hurt Alessia's eyes.

She moved her finger across the stitched cut on her cheek in morbid, dull, fascination. It had mostly healed since the accident, but the dried residue remained, rough and lumpy under her fingers. She resisted the urge to pick at it.

Alessia felt her father's hand rest on her shoulder. She looked up at him standing behind her. He had cleaned up well enough, his scraggly brown-yellow beard was cleaner than she'd seen in months, and he was wearing a loose brown suit. But his face was littered with bandages and he wore a cast on his left arm. He stared ahead, gazing into some deep unknown that neither Alessia nor anyone else could see.

Finally, he looked down at her, and motioned her to walk forward.

"If you wanna," he said.

She didn't want to, but she wanted to look 'strong' and 'grown-up' in front of her father and all the friends of the family who had gathered there. Thinking about it made her stomach hurt and made her want to cry.

Biting her lip, she stepped forward and worked her way through the pews. A few of the adults around cast saddened glances in her directions. Her aunt Tilde reached down and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. As she walked, her eyes danced across the ceilings above her, ornate angular shapes that spiked in all different directions. The sight used to awe her. Not anymore.

The casket was polished oak, glistening in the scattered sunlight. She wasn't quite close enough to see inside, but its top was opened up like a mouth, giving a peek at the luxurious white silk insides.

She paused and looked back towards her dad. He stared, biting his lips, and shaking his head to nobody in particular a few times. She wondered why he was doing that as she turned back to the casket.

Alessia was closer to the casket, and she leaned forward on her tip-toes to look inside. Her mother's body lay there. She looked peaceful and clean, like maybe she could have died in her sleep. As she watched the vacant face, the realization crushed her stomach: she would never see mommy again.

Alessia burst into tears, unable to hold them back any more. She threw her hands in her arms,

hoping nobody would see.

"The poor girl," she heard Aunt Tilde whisper.

Wiping away the last tear, she took one last look at her mother's vacant face. Her stomach didn't hurt anymore, but now it felt like it was burning. The heat spread to her entire body. Her face contorted. She looked upwards and muttered "I hate you."

I'm hearing voices in my head, Alessia thought to herself. I've gone insane.

A brisk autumn wind blew past the bus stop where she and a handful of other commuters waited.

I'm broken, she thought. I died, and something inside of me broke. It was the only thing that made sense to her.

The rest of the day had passed without incident; she hadn't heard any more voices in her head. At first she'd tried to rationalize it to herself. She was stressed, not feeling good about life in general, re-living emotional moments in her life, chances are, maybe it was just some subconscious coping mechanism... something.

Before she left the office, she started Googling psychiatrists in the area. After a few minutes though, she scrapped the idea. It all sounded ridiculous when she thought through the situation in her head. She was dead, then she came back to life and was... what? Hearing voices? Talking to God? It would take all of about ten minutes for the shrink to root out her little habit of talking to "Him" when it came to matters of faith, and come up with some kind of psycho-babble connection between that and the voices inside of her head.

Or maybe it isn't psycho-babble, she pondered. Maybe I'm just so desperate to hear something back, that my head...

She scowled and shook off the thoughts.

Tires squealed as the transit bus grinded to a halt in front of her. As the door slid open, she stepped over a puddle of water and climbed up into the bus. As she paid her fare, she cast a glance at the group of people lining up behind her to get inside. One of them was the flirtatious man from the office.

Moving through the bus, she considered going to the very back, but was dissuaded by the sight of a sleeping stranger. Alessia couldn't tell if it was a he or a she, but the person was wrapped tightly in a dirty, grubby, brown blanket, draped all around and up over the head. Alessia guessed he or she was homeless, especially because of the incredibly pale look on their face and the faint sock-like odor coming from the person. Strange characters like this were a fairly common fixture on Boston's transit system, whether on the trains or buses.

She sat down at a window seat halfway into the bus and pretended to look out the window. In fact, she was watching the reflection in the glass as the man from the office came onboard and sat down across the aisle, about three rows in front of her.

Maybe I'm just being paranoid, she thought. Or maybe he's some weird stalker freak. Maybe he has a creepy shrine set up on his dresser. With some bemusement, she pictured him sitting cross-legged on the ground, staring up at photos of her plastered across the mirror, with lit candles around him and little lipstick hearts drawn around her face.

I could get off at the next stop, she thought, various ideas running through her head. Wait for the next bus - if he follows me off then I'd really know something is up.

Alessia-

She gasped suddenly at hearing the voice again. It was so loud.

"Who are you?" she whispered

BEHIND YOU! the voice insisted, sounding very matter-of-fact. The words echoed like a bell inside of her head.

She hesitated, thrown by the directness of the statement, before looking behind her.

Alessia turned just in time to see the homeless person at the back of the bus rise to their feet and cast aside the filthy brown blanket.

She could see now that it was a woman, but her skin looked even whiter now than it did before; she resembled an albino, except her white skin was even more pronounced and somehow artificial – it almost glowed. She wore a somewhat loose-fitting gray tunic, and her eyes were a fierce watery blue, with her blond hair was tied up in a simple bun behind her head.

Six sticks of explosives were strapped to her chest.

It was a crude contraption, the sticks bound together by a thick black Velcro strap, with clumsy red wires jumping from one stick to the other. A single black wire extended outwards from the bomb to a small metal trigger in the woman's left hand.

Concentrate.

Run! Run! RUN! She told herself, but her legs wouldn't move – the fear paralyzed her. She could feel each thump of her heart, beating so rapidly it might explode out of her chest.

Your heartbeat, too fast, I'm afraid... let me slow it down for you

The panic disappeared and her mind cleared.

The entire world around her began moving in slow motion, as everything happened at once.

The bus driver slammed his foot down on the brake. Someone screamed in terror. People from the back seats scrambled forward in panic. The tires screeched as the bus tried to stop. The woman's white thumb moved to the red trigger button.

Alessia felt a hand grasp her arm and yank her out of the seat. As she flung down the aisle, she saw the person pulling her was the man from the office. Keeping a firm grip on her, the man *leaped* forward towards the front windshield, literally dragging Alessia into the air with him.

Over the screams of terror, she somehow heard the faint *click* of the bomber's thumb pushing the trigger. The woman exploded in a torrent of fire that radiated outwards, engulfing each seat of the bus. The rushing fire devoured two bystanders behind Alessia, their burning bodies forming a temporary shield.

Gravity had now taken control of Alessia's body as she tumbled head-first through the front windshield of the bus, shattering the glass into a million pieces. Each one took a tiny bite of her skin, as if they were teeth. She felt the heat of the fire radiate up her back and singe the back of her legs.

Her body bounced *hard* on the metal hood of the bus and the ricochet threw her body forward towards the street. Fire licked out of the bus windows. Then there was a silence before the fire reached the bus' engine. Alessia saw the rushing pavement in front of her eyes as she fell to the ground, just as she heard the BOOM behind her. Then it all went black.