Alternate

Chapter One: Her Little Breakdown

Tanner didn't know much. She didn't know whether she was sane; she didn't know if moving away from her family was worth it; she didn't know who the face in her camera belonged to. But she did know that hallucinations weren't supposed to show up on film. Especially when the psychiatrist could see them as well.

The man leaned in towards the screen and squinted. "The little girl? In the woods? She is the one you always see?"

"She's changed a little, since I first saw her. It's like… It's like she's gotten clearer. But she started coming closer too, so that could be it." Tanner's voice was soft, with a sort of quivering edge. It was a stark contrast from her four-inch heels and fake red nails that screamed confidence, even if it was the cheap, plastic sort. The psychiatrist sighed and leaned back, the wheels squeaking slightly as his massive weight was pushed against the plush leather backrest.

"You know, I'm not sure I can help you."

"What?"

"I said I'm not sure I can help you."

"But I… you said…"

"That I consider myself a sort of specialist in hallucinations, yes. But as far as I can tell, this is no hallucination. Like you've said, others have seen it, the cameras show it, and so, even if she disappears and reappears, even if she's following you, she's not a hallucination."

"Then what is she?" Tanner asked, moving forward a bit as her fingers clawed into the wooden armrest.

"I don't know,” the man said calmly, putting up his hands in defense as she let out a little pained-sounding moan. "But I know someone who might." She slipped to the edge of her chair, but he still took his time speaking, measuring his words.

"I worked with a kid once, one from the streets. Anytime he saw a new person he went into a sort of momentary altered state of consciousness. He claimed that anytime he met someone for the first time he saw the scene that caused them the most guilt. I admit, he made an immediate impression on me, because after his little lapse in consciousness he told me a secret that very few people knew. He had an aggression problem because he believed that certain things he saw warranted punishment. Naturally, I got him on medicine, and we discussed whether or not remorse should be configured into punishment for crimes."

He saw her fidgeting as the story grew on and looked down at her with eyebrows raised over his glasses. She had the strange urge to knock them off his sweaty, red little face. "Anyway, after a while I started to doubt whether or not the scenes he was seeing were really of a hallucinatory quality, because no medicine stopped them, and he struck fear into the faces of everyone he met with his stories of their past crimes, and normally in remarkable detail. I tried to suggest that some sort of superior knowledge helped him perceive the faults people found in themselves, but that didn't explain how he could tell the color of the shoes that were puked on, so the story quickly fell flat. I had a few of my colleagues inspect him to help me, and the story of him and his extraordinary powers caused a minor and temporary tidal wave in the field, at least in this area. Soon, a man who said he specialized in people with uncommon abilities came. He took an interest in the boy, and before we knew it, the boy was gone. Not my job to look into. But that wasn't before he left me with a card, in case I got any other similar strange cases. I think I might send you to him." He studied the woman. She was staring intently at the desk now, eyes avoiding him.

"Is this a joke?" Her voice was hoarse, almost a whisper.

"I said I'd help you come to grips with reality. It may seem strange, but this is reality." He grabbed a little box containing various business cards mixed together haphazardly. She ran a hand through her long, wavy brown hair, on the side that was a lot thicker than the other. When he still hadn't found it she began picking at her nail. He grabbed a plain white business card, and wrote the number down on an index card before shoving it back into the box and burying it among the other entries. "I don't remember his name, but I don't think that really matters." He handed her the index card. "Call him. That's the best thing I can suggest. If he can't help you, I'm not sure you can be helped, because it's not my job to deal with disappearing people, just non-existent ones."

She paced around the large, poorly furnished apartment. There was nothing for her to fixate on because nothing was hers— it was all new and strange, meant to please others. It was a lousy new start, when she thought about it. But she was only thinking about it to avoid calling the number, so she tried to focus on the shaking cellphone screen. At least it didn't matter that her hands were shaking anymore— the number was already typed. The green call button simply needed to be pressed. She counted down from three. She closed her eyes as the ring echoed in her ears, but she couldn't pace with her eyes closed till she knew the placement on the furniture better, so she opened them and focused instead on counting through her breaths as she paced. She thought about how she counted too much. She wondered what she'd say if it went to voicemail. She worried that it might; she secretly hoped it did. But, at what seemed to be the final second, she heard a click of a finger against a button when she was answered. Neither spoke for a moment.

"Hello," she said, her voice filled with a feigned cheerfulness.

"Who is this?" The voice was sharp, suspicious, unidentifiable as male or female, and decidedly young. She heard noises in the background, the whispers of small children, and the shushing of their caretakers. She could feel the weight of many listeners.

"Tanner. I— I'm Tanner."

"Tanner who?"

"Tanner Sylvia Korek."

"Like the poet!" A younger, higher voice rose, and a number of voices urged this new speaker to shut up.

"Y-yes," Tanner said, capturing something easy to talk about, a subject she recognized, had heard before, in fact. "I'm related to Sylvia Plath if that's whom you're referring to, though it's a distant relation, obviously."

"Where'd you get this number from?" The original speaker didn't seem to care much at all for random tidbits of her person but focused on more pointed questions.

"My therapist."

"Why did he give it to you?"

"Because my hallucinations are real." The other end of the line was silent, and she swallowed, searching for words. "I mean… I... I see someone who keeps disappearing and reappearing, but she's real."

"Wait just a minute." There was silence, enough time for Tanner to think about how strange the situation was, stop her pacing, lean her head against the cold, hard wall, close her eyes, and let her panic increase.

"Hello." A man's voice was on the line now, a silky yet bright one. She pulled her head back, happy about the thought of talking to someone sane. "Sorry about that. The kids are a bit over-excited. I'm assuming that you called because you have some sort of seemingly supernatural problem." She nodded, but it didn't seem to matter that he couldn't hear it, because after a second he pressed on without her needing to say anything. "What seems to be your personal problem?"

"I see a little girl that disappears."

"Do other people see her?"

"Yes."

"But she definitely disappears, not just leaves?"

"Yes."

"Well, this seems to be right up our alley then. Could you come to New York?" The question caught her off guard.

"I… I guess so."

"Great. When could you be here?" Her mind raced through a mental calendar.

"Saturday." She couldn't miss work; couldn't let them know about her little breakdown.

"Saturday it is then. I'll text you the address Saturday, and you just show up there anytime you want, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, gripping the phone till her knuckles turned white.
 "Great, that's great. Don't worry about this, Tanner, we'll take care of it for you. See you then, Ms. Tanner."