

A Rose By Another Thorn

7/22/22

Mackenzie

One-two-four-one-nine. The number of days since I first heard the voice. Happy birthday to me.

I have always thought in digits. People make very little sense. But when I stare through a numerical lens, the world becomes at least a bit clearer. Today, I turned forty-one. The twenty-second day of the seventh month. I can count the weeks on my hands between now and when it will all end.

No one knows what's on the horizon. Or what they did to deserve it. But the plan was set in motion long ago. Around the third time his hand struck my face. A girl can only get knocked down and torn to pieces so much before all hell breaks loose.

~

Samantha

I smiled slightly at my phone screen as I read birthday wishes from Natasha and William – two of my former partners, who were currently off on their own top-secret missions. My parents took me out for dinner earlier in the week before jutting off on a cruise. So, I spent another Friday evening pouring my eyes over old files in a closed case while slurping cold noodles to celebrate another revolution of the Earth. The small voice in the back of my head could not let go of its fixation on the victory of a century that earned me my promotion and shiny new office.

A knock on the ajar door pulled me from my typical thought spiral. “Am I interrupting?” Lieutenant Leslie Cho asked as she opened a small box to reveal two perfectly decorated cupcakes.

“You’re a welcome distraction,” my lips tilted up slightly. I grabbed two napkins from next to the coffee maker and set them on the desk as Leslie dished out the treats.

“I see I’m not the only one who can’t leave well enough alone,” Leslie motioned at the open files on my desk about The Serpent and the Dragon. “Isn’t this fancy new job of yours supposed to mean the case is closed?”

I leaned back in my chair and sighed, “It should be. Everyone else thinks it is. But I just can’t shake the feeling that we missed something. That the story isn’t quite over.”

~

Mackenzie

Once upon a time, I think I liked birthdays. Before my mother disappeared. Eventually, I learned her departure was less of a choice and more of a murder. A fact I discovered on none other than my fourteenth birthday when I literally dug up her bones. That night I killed my father – partly for revenge, partly for a reprieve from the pain. No one can outrun the darkness, of course, but I did not know that yet.

The voice fluctuated between a whisper in the deepest corners of my mind and a scream ripping through my insides. I mostly credit my father for the path my life took, but a little piece of me also blames my mother. If she had mustered the strength to leave him, the unconditional love her child deserved to get me out, maybe I never would have needed another outlet. Maybe I would not have turned to the family in my head over the one of flesh in front of my eyes.

Twenty-seven years with only the truth and the voice to keep me company. By now, I am equal parts Adversary and Mackenzie. But for better or worse, I still hold the memories of the latter.

~

7/23/22

Samantha

No one ever made a big deal about my birthday. As one of six children with two working parents, we would celebrate with dinner of my choosing and cupcakes from my favorite bakery but nothing extravagant. In fact, I cannot even remember the last time I received a birthday present.

So, the following morning when my daily crossword and coffee session got interrupted by a knock, I did not expect to see a man standing at my door with a bouquet of tulips and gift bag. Staff Sergeant Jeremiah Banks – who now worked security at a local high school and had spent the better part of the last decade covertly helping me investigate the cold case everyone told me to drop before I made the biggest bust of my career – remained perched on my front porch with a goofy grin on his face.

“Sorry, I’m a day late,” he passed me the items in his hand and helped himself to a latte from my sputtering espresso machine. “I just got back into town late last night. Covert ops and what not.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be retired?” I grabbed a vase for the flowers then lightly touched his shoulder blade as I scooped behind him.

“Well, with my new job leaving my summers free, I have to keep busy somehow,” he winked as if that sentence ended with an ellipsis rather than a period. Then he nudged the present toward me as he blew steam from his mug.

I removed two pieces of white tissue paper from the teal and silver bag. When I peered inside, I saw two items: a large picture frame and a small, stuffed snow leopard. Upon lifting the former out of its packaging, my eyes caught a newspaper clipping from an article about how I busted the world’s most notorious killing duo. Sprawled across the bottom – in Jeremiah’s messy cursive – read the words, “Never forget to celebrate your victories.” As the tips of my lips curved up against my will, I then reached for the plush and hugged it to my chest as I let slip, “I cannot believe you remembered.”

“The day we wandered the zoo, which I still proclaim was a strange choice for a clandestine meeting, you told me snow leopards were always your favorite as a child,” Jeremiah brushed a strand of hair from my face. “How could I forget one of our best moments?”

That word, *our*, stuck in my ears the rest of afternoon as he convinced me to grab lunch then go bowling together. An activity I had not done since college, but he insisted it helped with his PTSD and could lessen mine as well. So, who was I to argue?

~

Mackenzie

I tended to the roses at the asylum they rebranded as a “criminal rehabilitation center” like I did every Saturday morning. It had become one of the few pleasant parts about living here as I waited for the hourglass to finally run out.

A frazzled blonde woman with a mystical energy around her came practically crashing into the courtyard. She stumbled to the table on the opposite side of the enclosed outdoor space, uttering out-of-breath apologies and sitting down next to the old man from the floor below me. She did not yet know the full role she would play in our impending fate. Or how interconnected our threads truly were. But soon her band of misfits would finally put together the puzzle pieces I so beautifully laid.

At night, a duology of alternating dreams plagued my vision. The first revolved around my impending face-off with the good doctor. Oh, I truly could not wait for that.

The other, however, resonated more deeply as it starred the yang to my yin. The woman whose life my soul could have just as easily taken since our births aligned almost to the minute. Yet she got the happy childhood with the stable home. While I received bruises, ER trips, and two murdered parents before I could even drive.

I contemplated the balanced energy of it all – the light and the darkness, the positive and the negative, the nurtured little girl and the monster. As a treat some days to pass the time, I let myself swim in the whirlpool of intrusive thoughts I otherwise avoided. Unconsciously, I found my hand reaching for a rose. With an image of the angry, arrogant Special Agent Samantha Reager burned into my corneas, I placed my left index finger on the sharpest thorn I could. Then I pressed down with all my force.

~

Samantha

Jeremiah and I returned to my condo after he beat me decidedly three games out of three. I cooked my mom's famous pasta casserole filled to the brim with shrimp, vegetables, and three kinds of cheese as he selected a movie for us to watch.

While I waited for dinner to finish baking, an inexplicable prick on my index finger startled a screech from me. Jeremiah called in from the other room to see what was wrong. As I stared at blood gushing out of a pinpoint mark on my right hand, I yelled back some lie about cutting myself. I scrubbed clean my wound and wrapped it in a band-aid. But I moved in a trance, desperately trying to sort through what happened. And more importantly, why had it left me with a looming sensation that the end was near and my bleeding hand was the key?