

CHAPTER 1

Oliver

Like any man, I loved my wife; but these 3 a.m. suicidal thoughts were killing me. Her thoughts seeped into my dreams and tugged me toward consciousness. Without opening my eyes to look at her side of the bed, I knew she was in the kitchen stirring her tea because the image filled my mind. The spoon clanged against the sides of the mug and the steam rose from the cup to tickle my nose.

I wasn't fully awake when the tsunami of her misery slammed into me. Images flooded my mind. Our lifeless shih-tzu puppy limp in the street, her grandmother's eyes dimmed with death, a six-year-old girl bruised and beaten into silence.

The blood pounded "Your fault, your fault, your fault" against my temple. Sorrow pinched my nostrils and grief crushed my trachea.

I sputtered against the onslaught, blindly lashing out at the darkness coalescing around me. *These are not my feelings, these are not my thoughts, this is not my pain, this is not me.* The mantra became a way to survive my wife's inadvertent attacks.

I kicked away the sheets, pushed myself upright, and pressed my back against the cold certainty of the headboard's wrought iron bars. I gobbled up air. My jackrabbit pulse began to tortoise.

I imagined slabs of granite entombing me. Re-establishing the boundary of me. Creating a psychic shield from my wife. Her emotions had eviscerated my last chance at sleep. Why? Because my wife was a suicidal telepath.

Lately, it had become my job, nah, my sworn duty, to anchor her sanity.

Wonder if old Mrs. Thompson next door felt it? Last time it got this bad, the entire building fell into a funk for a week. No one realized it was my wife's feelings broadcast over a special bandwidth that screwed with their heads.

She couldn't help it. Hell, I didn't know how she did it. Imagine standing in Times Square 24-7, then multiply the noise by 10,000. The thoughts and feelings of everyone within a half-mile radius beat around in her head all day, while she kept hers under wraps.

Her emotional attacks always came at night. They were a complicated calculus equation derived from emotional intimacy and physical proximity. Being her husband rendered me ground zero. She probably didn't even realize her feelings had poured into me and were trickling out to the neighbors. I couldn't be mad at her. Annoyed, yes, but not mad.

By the time I padded down the hall to the kitchen, she'd already whisked the Jacques Torres cocoa mix into the warmed milk—the one perk of a telepath. Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad. She still heard my thoughts. Shit, not all of them. Please not all of them.

She looked up, plastering a smile on her tired face. Amusement lurked in her dark blue eyes. “Some of them. And I'm not gonna do that, so stop dreaming about it.”

I laughed as I made my way to the side of the kitchen counter that jutted into our living room. I pulled out my stool and sat down. The kitchen light blazed above my wife as she measured a shot of Grand Marnier and poured it into my mug. Her trembling hands worried me.

The living room behind me remained blanketed in semi-darkness. No matter how late my wife was up, she didn't turn on the lights in the living room. She didn't venture in there. Crossing that threshold was tantamount to admitting she'd never fall back to sleep. And my wife preferred to pretend this was going to pass. That it was just a little summer storm. Not the blizzard of her existence.

She glided around the counter, her feet never straying from the sections of the hardwood floor lit by the kitchen. It was how she demarcated the dining area from the living room. She pushed the warm mug of hot chocolate into my hand and perched on the stool beside me. Her fiery red hair fell over her face as she blew into her teacup.

“Rough night?” I rested my palm against the granite countertop.

“The usual.” Her voice lost its warmth.

“Work?”

She stared into her tea.

“One of your cases?”

Her voice shook. “They’re not cases, they’re kids.”

“What happened?”

She shook her head and hunched her shoulders. “Bad day.”

It was her seventh bad day in a week. “Let’s go back to California.” I’d spent the entire year begging her to relocate. “Somewhere near Death Valley.” Desolate enough to allow her mind to recover from the city’s constant bombardment.

“No,” she said.

“Once things calm down, you can do your work in a smaller city or a town.” There were children in need all over the country.

“I’m not leaving Manhattan.” Her fingers flexed around her mug. “I won’t abandon them.”

“You can’t save them all.”

She shook her head. “I’m just having a bad spell. It’ll pass. This is our home.”

It's where we'd started our adult life together. The place we returned to after we got married. Leaving meant accepting defeat. Admitting that she wasn't the same person.

Sadness clipped my chin. On nights like these, sitting this close, the psychic shield she'd taught me to build was almost useless.

"Sorry," she mumbled. I reached out and she scooted away from me. "I can't protect you if you touch me."

"I can handle the depression." I dug into my memory of the first time she kissed me. Her fingernails tickled my forehead as she swept my hair back from my face. I couldn't stop staring into her eyes. They were darker than the night sky and warmer than a Wisconsin Indian summer. They reminded me of home. Her mouth tasted of powdered-sugar munchkins and creamy coffee.

I pulled her into my arms, let her hopelessness fill me, extracted some of her pain.

She tensed, but I didn't release her. We'd been through this before.

Minutes ticked by before she relaxed and whispered, "I miss munchkins."

I pressed my lips against her hair.

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The next morning, I sipped my third cup of office coffee and wished I'd gotten more sleep. I bit into the powdered donut I grabbed from the cart in front of my building. Sugar and caffeine were the only things that kept me running lately. Sleep was a Rolex beyond my reach. Sometimes, I booked a conference room for a 20-minute snooze to remain functional. If a meeting lasted over 30 minutes, my boss, Mr. Gong, wanted to attend. Naps were the least negotiable item on his list of office infractions.

Unless of course you were Jameson, trained by me and promoted over me. He sat in the office beside Gong's. All that privacy didn't help him turn a report in on time. He took two-hour lunches. He was known to open a beer at his desk after 5 p.m.

I bet he never worried about his wife killing herself because of a five-alarm fire on the news. Shaneeka in front of me was good for a crazy story about her boyfriend, but she never had to hold him while he shook for hours after someone died within a 10-block radius.

They say people are only given what they can handle. That pain is a personal and private experience. They've never met my wife. She experienced everyone's emotions as her own. People telegraphed their most painful thoughts. Emotions, the rawest form of thought, lanced through her. Death reverberated inside her head like a continual scream over the din of ten thousand voices. She couldn't block it out. Emotional pain wore down her shield, but death shredded it.

What about happy people? They saved up all their joy for themselves. Selfish bastards.

In the cube adjacent to mine, Murray's voice dipped low. "I'm sorry, baby."

Only a hip-high partition separated us. I could reach over and yank away the phone he cradled to his ear.

Another late night out with the guys—poker night my ass. We all knew where he went with that wad of dollar bills. But he'd send roses, and his wife would forgive him again. Then I'd get to hear about the makeup sex.

In my emails, a meeting invite from Gong popped up. I didn't want to click ok and let him capture an hour of my afternoon, but his invites were never optional. The littlest Napoleon on Wall Street could only intimidate via email.

A text from Murray popped up on my screen. *Another Gongathon.*

Gong didn't allow us to talk at our cubes. The racket interfered with his concentration when he was shopping online in his office.

Get ready for a demotivational speaker, I typed.

Hello hump day.

Gong probably wanted to lecture us on how we had to focus and be more ambitious. If only he had a pint of my ambition. It was simple. I wanted to make life better for my wife. To take away the telepathy. But I couldn't.

Next best thing? I had a plan. A plan I'd carefully laid out while I sat in my cube, 3.3 miles from our apartment and 4.5 miles from her office. Way outside the perimeter of my wife's telepathy. The plan necessitated going places I never wanted to return to. To save my wife from her own best intentions.

I looked up from my computer as the new admin sashayed toward me. She paused when she caught my eye. Her lips curved into a kitten's saucer. "Is that a new tie?"

I glanced at it. "My wife bought it for me."

She leaned over my cubicle wall so that her breasts strained against the edge of her top. "It brings out the amber in your eyes."

"They're brown." She needed to stop flirting with me and put her boobs back in her shirt. Hell, buy a shirt. When she didn't leave, I added, "I have to get an email out."

"Stop by anytime." She sauntered away.

I didn't have time for distractions. This was my wife's life we were talking about here. The report due tomorrow, I didn't start writing it. I worked best under pressure—they'd never know how much.