

THE LONDON HERO

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Dedicated to change: I am coming for you.

I truly hope one day my mind will be
cleansed and freed in such way, that I no longer
ache to be in pain.

14-07

My walls aren't vertical, they're horizontal.

And I didn't build them for you,

I built them for me.

There is not much to come back for,
but there is also no more reason to stay away.

CHAPTER 1

“Is she going to make it?”

An eerie silence fell between them. The intensive care unit was oddly quiet. No one had said the words out loud, but everyone wished they had received more patients.

The doctor standing next to him scraped her throat and gave him the rundown of the situation.

“I can’t give you any guarantees at this stage. If she pulls through the first 24 hours I will be able to tell you more. The injuries she has sustained are... they’re quite severe. And then there’s of course the emotional component, which makes it even harder to judge the situation at this stage.”

Agent Curtis had his gaze fixed on the young woman. Today’s events in London made him sick to his stomach. The nurses had positioned the young woman’s body in a peaceful way, which made it look like she was sleeping and could wake up any time. It gave him a false sense of security, nothing about it was real. His brain registered what his eyes saw, but his soul refused to believe any of it.

“The biggest milestone would be for her to start breathing on her own again.”

The doctor, whose name badge read Tisley, quickly glanced at the coffee cup in his left hand and noticed a slight discoloration on his ring finger. Many hands, all with different stories to tell, had held that cup during the time she had worked at the London hospital’s intensive care unit. It was the coffee patients’ relatives would drink when they’d spend the night not wanting to leave their loved ones alone and praying everything would turn out okay. Sometimes it did turn out okay for those families, but sadly sometimes it did not.

The forty-some year-old took a small sip of his coffee, his gaze still fixed on the woman. His skin was pale, and his eyes looked as if he’d just been crying. There was nothing left in his eyes, no fire or anger. Just emptiness.

“Hang in there, Agent Curtis,” Dr. Tisley told him as she lightly lay her hand on his elbow. Then she turned around and walked away through the long white hallway, onto her next patient.

The buzzing from his phone startled him and he took his gaze off the young woman.

“Yes?”

He didn’t like stretching phone conversations too much, not on the work floor at least. They were meant to be to the point and effective. His agents knew that about him, and within ten seconds he had hung up the phone again. He looked at the woman one last time, hoping she would still be alive when he’d return, but knowing he would be one of the very few to feel that way about her.

He turned around and left the young woman to fight on her own. On his way out, he abandoned the cup in a rubbish bin.

The hospital was busy. It surprised him. He had expected the hospital to have worked through its rush-time by now. He looked around the emergency room and wondered what all these people would do if they knew it was him. At some point when the world did know it was him, they would have his face imprinted on their retina. He'd be famous; admired and hated. He was excited for his future, but he was also relieved to keep a low profile for the time being.

He walked up to the reception desk where a nurse was busy answering phone calls from distressed family members and media channels. The red lights on the sides of the device told him all lines were busy.

She looked at him briefly, but didn't utter a word in his direction. He realized he looked and acted too calm for this scenery, but he couldn't help himself. He thrived under these circumstances; the panic, the fear, the drama, the adrenaline. Those were the components he needed to create a calm atmosphere inside his mind. This was his Walhalla and he wanted it to last as long as it possibly could.

Unfortunately, part of his job was blending in. And being the only calm person in the emergency room made him stand out like a sore thumb. He couldn't draw attention to himself, it would jeopardize the rest of his mission.

He took off his vest and was glad to see that the blood had turned most of the bandage dark red, leaving a red mark on his shirt. Just as he

wanted to take a seat a woman rushed to his side – his plan to attract attention had worked.

“Sir, what happened to you? Were you a victim of the bombing?” Her puffy, red eyes indicated she must’ve been working her second shift of the day. Her slim and fit body stood in front of him, dressed in dark blue scrubs. Her blond hair, tied in a ponytail, had started to slip off the top of her head and was now hanging loosely in her neck. Clearly, she hadn’t had a second of peace since the first injured person had been brought in.

“Yes, I am. I know you are busy, so I tried to fix it myself, but it just keeps bleeding.” He was a great actor and he knew it. He could create a sympathetic encounter in seconds.

“Alright, I need you to come with me.”

She went ahead and pulled up a chair in a place where there had been a bed before. He sat down and looked around the room, created by green curtains.

“You’re awfully calm,” she noticed.

“I’m used to it.”

She looked at him, clearly unsure what he meant by his remark. For a moment she seemed fearful.

“It happens a lot around here.” He quickly explained her using a Middle Eastern accent. “How many?” he asked and mimicked a concerned facial expression, but she didn’t look at him.

She removed the bandage and disinfected his arm. “I don’t know. Hundreds are injured, I’m sure. I don’t know how many have lost their lives though.”

He detected a trace of a foreign accent; he just couldn't place it. "Have you lost anyone today?" He didn't make eye contact, but instead stared at the floor feeling scared a hint of pride might show on his face.

"I don't know yet," her eyes filled with tears as she pushed her teeth tightly together to stop herself from bursting out in tears.

She injected him with a local anaesthesia about an inch above the wound and wiped away the small dot of blood left behind by the needle. Blood was still pouring out of the wound and she handed him another bandage to stop the bleeding as she injected a second local anaesthesia an inch below the wound. She put the needle down on the tray and looked him straight in the eye.

"I hope they stone the person responsible."

He looked at her. The expression should've connected with him in some way. Anger, fear, anything. Instead he smiled. There was something about her he liked; a certain fire, a certain boldness. To his surprise she smiled back at him.

"The anaesthesia will take a few minutes to work. I'll be back with you shortly and stitch you up. Then you can go home."

He nodded in response and watched her walk away.

Her eyes stared at her own reflection in silence. It wasn't often she felt this unsure about her next move. Either way her action had consequences. There were two options to choose from, both with such different outcomes it made her uneasy. Yet for some reason she also knew it wouldn't matter, her future was written in the stars somehow. Regardless of what decision she made now, the outcome would remain the same. Because both had a common denominator: her. In either situation

she had the possibility to change her circumstances and in that, she could find true freedom. She could feel powerful.

However, at this given moment, she didn't feel powerful. She felt overwhelmed by a choice she couldn't make. It was as if her heart and her brain were both pulling her in opposite directions. She needed to feel in control again, that would make everything better. And so, staring at her own face looking at all imperfections, redness, small spots, hairs and blemishes, she tried to find ways to feel powerful in both hypotheticals.

Her body was in pain and she couldn't understand why. Her mind worked perfectly fine, noting and noticing everything going on around her. In fact, her mind hadn't been this sharp in a long time. It was as if she was on some drug which helped her focus. Street drugs were out of her comfort zone though; pills and alcohol were her poison. But street drugs she had never touched, she had seen it go horribly wrong too many times in her line of work.

Although she didn't move, her muscles ached and she could feel her organs crying out for help. The body she had fought to destroy was shutting down and it felt so peaceful to finally not have to look after it anymore.

Her mind was still here, working full speed, better than it ever had before. Her body was useless, she didn't need it anymore. Right here, in this moment, she could stay forever. Looking at herself, staring into her soul and not having to worry about anyone interrupting the highly intellectual connection and conversations the people inside her head were having – it was peace.

Not once did she stop to consider telling herself it was okay to disappoint. Whichever way life would go, people would be disappointed in

her. And whichever way life would go she would try and please people even if it meant she wouldn't be okay. Not once did she stop to consider telling herself it was okay to choose happiness, to choose mental health over missed opportunities.

All she noticed was having to close one door and the fear of the possibility that another might not open again. She needed a moment of insane courage to give her power so she could decide her life.

Deep down she already knew what needed to be done. Heart versus brain, it didn't matter. The common denominator would eventually balance out life in the way it had always intended to run.

People live their lives by the grace of the encounter. Throughout her life she had painted a picture in her mind of whom she wanted to be. At first, she was scared to admit it to herself, then to say it out loud, then to act on it, and finally, to admit it to others.

Her hazel brown eyes moved from her reflection to the inside of her left wrist. There was something there that shouldn't have been there. The fact that it was should've given her enough direction to decide on what needed to happen. There was also something missing, something she wanted to be there. *Let pleasure be your plan, you deserve it.*

Whichever way she twisted it; the outcome would be the same. It would mean *him*. She just needed to decide which road to take; the healthy one, or the addictive one.

At last she looked back at her reflection and allowed herself to smile.

It took nearly forty-five minutes for her to return, during which time no one else had even looked at him. Far more seriously injured people

had the right of way before him. When she returned, her face had gone pale. She closed the curtain.

He realized it wasn't so much for his privacy as it was for hers. She grabbed the necessary utensils, once again cleaned the wound and tested to see if the anaesthetic still had its full effect, which he comforted her in saying that it did.

Without saying a word, she pushed her fingers into the wound and took out a tiny piece of metal. She held it out in her hand and then put it in a plastic cup on the tray.

"That'll go to the lab," she broke the silence within the curtains. "Although I doubt it'll be of much use."

In all his years of experience he had never had a piece of his art removed from his own body. He wanted to ask her if he could keep it, as a trophy. But he knew that would put him to the top of the suspect list. Middle Eastern male, immigrant, who asks to take home a piece of the bomb as a keepsake. The thought made him smile, but he quickly changed his facial expression when she locked eyes with him.

"Strange to think that..." He didn't finish his sentence.

She nodded. "We uhm..." she pushed her teeth together again, shaping a hard jawline. "We just lost a little boy because of that little piece of shitty scrap metal."

Little piece of shitty scrap metal. How dare she insult his art. He wisely kept his mouth shut, although within his mind there were hundreds of different responses shaping itself, each more aggressive than the previous one.

"I need you to relax your arm."

He realized he had made two fists and quickly relaxed his posture before giving her a faint smile.

“He was only ten... the look on his parents’ face... I will never forget it.”

She had finished the first stitch. Again, she looked him straight in the eye, looking for any sign of comfort.

He said nothing, nor did he give her the calming smile that had worked for her before. A chill rolled down her spine, his cold eyes had rejected her. It was as if he hated her emotion.

She quickly got to work on the second stitch. She could just be imagining it. Perhaps he too had lost someone the same way, and all of this brought back memories.

“Forgive me. I shouldn’t be discussing any of this with you. You are the patient and I am the nurse, not the other way around.” She smiled warmly at him, her way of asking for forgiveness.

He nodded shortly. *Little piece of shitty scrap metal. How dare she.* All empathy he had felt towards her had disappeared in a heartbeat. Although he did still feel attracted to her. There was something about the way she moved, the way she spoke.

He counted the stitches. Four down. Another five to go, he estimated.

She had finished the last stitch and placed the utensils on the tray next to him. The silence annoyed him. He knew there wasn’t much time left for the two of them to spend together, if he didn’t say something to comfort her now.

She was only young, and suddenly he realized perhaps she hadn't had the opportunity to fall in love with that scrappy metal the way he had. Judging by the cross around her neck she could've had a protective upbringing, close to God. Her mission may have been a different one, and besides, she also did not know he had been the creator of the art. There was always the possibility she was hiding amongst the humans too, feeling a desire to act on behalf of God to bring goodness into the world the way he had done tonight. She could've faked empathy the same way he had plenty of times. But if she had, she was a great actress.

He looked at her face again and could not detect any emotion. As if it had disappeared from her face, only to return when human interaction required it to be there. He gently touched her arm.

"Forgive me too. It's been a long night."

She looked him in the eye. A sigh of relief came over her, he noticed it. She wanted to be his friend. He wasn't wrong; there was an unmistakable connection between the two of them.

She smiled at him again, a real smile this time. "Yeah, it really has."

"What time do you get off?"

She shrugged. "The hospital called everyone in, I think I won't get off until tomorrow morning."

"It is tomorrow morning," he showed her his watch.

Half past one.

"Oh, well in that case I won't get off until sometime around ten, I guess. I hope I'll be able to get some sleep between now and then."

A part of him wished to take her out and whisk her away, but he knew he could not. She'd jeopardize his mission.

CHAPTER 2

Jack Binckle parked his car at the personnel entrance of The Royal London hospital's emergency room. As he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, the forty-one-year old reporter caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. A gruffy, unshaven man stared back at him. It had been a year since he was laid-off and it hadn't done much good for his mental health.

He opened the glove compartment and took out an orange bottle of pills. The anti-depressants had been the next step, alcohol had been the steppingstone. It had been a calculated move; one he knew would take him down a darker path. His general practitioner, a slim Chinese man in his thirties who he had seen twice in his life, had laid out the path towards obtaining the pills. There would need to be three consultations before he could prescribe them. It was a matter of precaution he had explained as the pills carried the risk of side effects, one of which being depression. The irony hadn't struck the young Chinese doctor.

Midway through his first consultation, Jack Binckle knew he wouldn't come back for the second and the third, but instead he had started his search for a different general practitioner, preferably one who was using the pills himself. He had found one, a middle-aged white male only a few years away from retiring. A capable, caring man nonetheless, but no longer a stickler for the rules and someone who didn't believe the latest research. Within five minutes of meeting him, his new G.P. had scribbled down a

prescription for Prozac in a handwriting only a pharmacist would be able to read.

The last pill found his way down his throat without a single zip of water as he observed the hospital's staff entrance. Two obese nurses walked towards the green doors, talking, laughing and showing no signs of sadness despite the earlier events. He knew what he was doing was not going to make him very well-liked in London, but he needed a quick buck.

He quickly got out of his car and caught the door just before it slammed shut. The long white hallways had no effect on him. In his family there were no sad tales of cancer or heart disease. There was pain, but the pain he felt wasn't in his body, it was in his mind. And in his experience, no hospital could cure that kind of pain.

Quickly navigating through the hospital, he found his way onto the ICU, which was remarkably quiet and smelled like Dettol. A female doctor slid a door close behind her and noted down her latest test results before handing over the clipboard to one of the preoccupied nurses at the front desk.

Less than half of the available rooms had patients in them and Jack Binckle at once recognized the person he had come for. Besides the female doctor there was only one nurse present in the ICU. Whoever ran the hospital had moved all available staff onto the emergency room, expecting a huge flood of people to come through the doors today.

One last glance at the hallway he had left behind him showed him no one was around, and he quickly disappeared into the young woman's room.

Utter shock replaced the adrenaline he had felt sneaking into the hospital. The sight of the young woman reminded him of the ugliness

London had had to deal with. An unaccounted number of bodies lay in the rubble and the families of those victims would never be the same again. A sense of remorse came over him. Jack Binckle had done unethical things to showcase the truth behind a story; breaking and entering, stealing and the occasional threat were methods to get his job done. But he had never broken moral for just a paycheck. Desperate times, called for desperate measurements.

He walked closer to the young woman and tried to take in her features, which were hidden underneath dried blood from cuts she had sustained. Her pale face had a tube sticking out of it, her chest slowly moved up and down along with the pumping and beeping of the machinery next to her. She had scratches and bruises all over her arms and a big cut in her right ear. When he looked below her waist, he knew that if she ever were to regain consciousness, she would never fully recover.

Jack Binckle stepped back and did what he had come to do. He took a picture of her pale face and then her whole body. He lowered the camera and took one last look when he realized she wore a hospital tag around her left wrist. For a moment he doubted whether he should, but then decided he would ultimately regret it if he didn't. He wouldn't necessarily need to give her name to any media station, he could hold onto it for a while until it suited him to use it.

Voices and footsteps came nearer the young woman's room. Quickly he lifted her left wrist, turned it over, laid it back down and took his picture. He slipped the camera into his bag and fled back into the hallway as he thought of what he had just seen.

Whatever her story may have been, Jack Binckle had understood those scars on the inside of her left wrist.

Interpol Director Wayne Kneebone turned off the television hanging on the wall opposite his desk. His top floor office offered a spectacular view of the city. London's Tower Bridge, The London Eye and Buckingham Palace all in one glance. But today that magnificent view showed nothing but hatred. He walked over to the window and looked down on the people he had vouched to protect.

"This is bad Patrick. Once the media starts broadcasting speculations, the public follows. And before you know it, we are creating a situation that's even more dangerous than the one we are in now. We've got to give them something. Something to make them believe it's all not as bad as it looks."

Patrick was sitting on one of the many desk chairs at the long chestnut conference table, his feet resting on the top of the desk.

"But how? We've got nothing. No suspects and no other leads."

Patrick looked at his boss, who had also become one of his closest friends over the past few years. His grey suit fit him nicely and fell perfectly over his broad shoulders. His hair had started turning grey about a year earlier and now matched the colour of his suit. The stress had gotten to him, although he would never admit to that.

Sirens were flashing far beneath him. Small dots represented the police and masses of innocent bystanders who were all in some way involved in the horrific crime that had hit his city today. He dreaded the questions the reporters would ask him. It was the same story over and over again. The authorities should've been aware of the sleeper terrorist cell,

but they weren't. Then he had to go ahead and come up with a reason why they weren't.

Truth was, because they simply hadn't had the time, money or manpower to go out and check every potential threat. Of course, he would never be able to say that out loud. It would make Interpol look weak, and then in turn, it would make the United Kingdom look weak. No, he had to set up a strong front. Fight fire with fire.

He could not bear another press conference where reporters without any law enforcement experience would shout at him and tell him how to do his job. Reality was, every now and then these things would happen, under any leadership. It didn't make it any less wrong or any easier to deal with, but there would never be a government in which such things would stop happening.

Sometimes he wished he could bring up all the terrorist attacks they had prevented. But there was a rule against that, one he understood. If they were to pride themselves with all the prevented attacks, no one would ever feel safe again.

"If only people knew how many attacks we have prevented. Just in the past six months alone," he eventually said.

"Yes. I agree. They'd be a little less hard on you. But it wouldn't change anything in the end."

"I know, I know."

The phone on his desk rang.

Patrick got up to answer as Kneebone stayed put, watching the flashing as he dreaded the final casualty count.

CHAPTER 3

My dearest stranger,

What if I told you I wanted to die? Would you forgive me? Would you try to understand and not blame me?

Because the truth is, I've always told myself the self-harm wasn't about wanting to die, but merely about punishing myself and feeling pain. Now however, I am not so sure anymore.

At times I want the darkness to take me away, because it'll be more peaceful for me. I know it would cause inconsolable heartache for you, which is why I continue to be strong and why I continue to fight. But sometimes, those days where I have to fight against this darkness, feels like inconsolable heartache too.

I'm scared to tell you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Scared to be judged and sentenced for it, afraid you will never consider me to be the strong, fun-loving woman again. Afraid you'll be afraid of leaving me on my own.

I don't want you to be upset or scared each time I'm having a tough day. I don't want you to

have to wonder whether I'd hurt myself if you left me alone. And I also don't want to be looked upon as crazy, because I am not.

Crazy is a great term when referring to art or fun. It's the worst you could call me when referring to my mental health. I have overcome more than some will ever have to worry about, and I continue to win with each day I spend on this earth.

I can't deny the fact however I am always fantasizing about leaving this earth. You are truly the only reason I am still here. If it wasn't for you, I would've left a long time ago.

It's strange, because guilt is keeping me from committing such act, although I wouldn't have to deal with the guilt anymore because I would be gone.

I'm causing you pain with the little bit of truth you know. It's the reason I don't tell you just how far gone I am and how much further gone I was.

I'll be honest and finally say the words out loud: I am an alcoholic, I am addicted to cutting, I suffer from episodes of severe depression and I starve myself purposely.

I know which events caused me to go down this path so far, all of which are too heart-breaking for me to tell you about.

Again, I fear your judgement even though I am aware I should be facing these traumas rather than run from it. But I also know the episodes of depression started occurring much earlier in my life, I think around the age of six. So, a long time before any traumas.

I want you to know I fight every day to choose healthy tools to work on my healthy mindset.

Please forgive me for my depressive mood swings or distant behaviour. I am always aware I am not me, and it hurts me to see you wonder why. It's why I stay away and retreat.

It's not you, it's me.

Still yours,
with love from afar.

I think people choose to believe in faith because they are scared to act upon what they want.

CHAPTER 4

There is a strict protocol in place for dealing with the aftermath of attacks like these. A protocol anyone in law enforcement officer ought to know by heart, regardless of their ranking or agency.

Using the little information the local police had received, they had arrived on the scene first and tried to create some order in the chaos. Evacuating the public had been their first step before securing the perimeter by shutting down all entrances and exits with crime scene tape. After that they had started taking statements from anyone who had seen something. Of course, by that time the people who had really seen something were either on their way to the hospital or they had fled the scene, in severe shock.

Early on into taking witness statements it had become painfully obvious there'd be no survivors on ground zero. The ones who had walked away from the explosion unharmed or mildly injured hadn't been anywhere near the bomb and quite simply didn't know anything. There were no descriptions of any person carrying anything closely related to a bomb. They asked as many witnesses as possible about their specific whereabouts and they had all answered various positions; hallways, public bathrooms,

any platforms, and so on. All positions were mentioned, except one: platform six.

Interpol, having its headquarters only a few blocks away from the scene, had arrived barely fifteen minutes after the explosion. Agent Curtis and his team knew from experience not to put too much faith in witness statements after an attack like this. Most people spoke out of fear; each Arab was a bomber and each Caucasian person was a victim.

Frustrated with the lack of information, Agent Curtis had decided it was time to move to this crime scene's ground zero; platform six. They wouldn't be the first ones down there. Braver men and women had gone inside before them. EMT's and local police had run towards the place victims and survivors had been running away from. They had carried the seriously injured out of the building and had calmed the panicked ones.

And then some of those EMT's and local police had arrived on platform six, the place where it would never be the same. It was obvious at first glance; no one could've survived an attack like this. That is until they had heard a soft groan and had pulled a young woman from underneath the rubble.

It was clear where the bomb had been. The meters adjacent to the spot had turned into somewhat of a crater. The people who had been standing closest to it were unrecognizable. They weren't even people anymore, just body parts – there'd be a lot of close caskets. The brown-yellow floor had turned a coal black, here and there coloured with red swipes and puddles of human blood.