

SHE'S
NOT
HERE

a novel

MANDI
LYNN

Chapter 1

8 months ago

Tom was sitting in the chair, his arms stretched out in front of him. He was smiling; he always smiled, but it never reached his eyes. He had his shirt buttoned all the way, just how he liked it—the fleece ironed to a crisp, fresh look. His peppered hair grew over his ears. He needed to go to the barber.

“Okay, Tom, how are you feeling today?” The doctor sat on the other end of the table. His white jacket was a stark contrast to Tom’s shirt, a bright amber-plaid.

“Great,” Tom said. His answer was short, clipped, as it often was.

“How did you get here today?” The doctor was playing with the pen on the table, his notepad at the ready.

“Uhh,” Tom let out a laugh as he turned and looked around the room. There was a moment of panic until his eyes met with the woman standing behind him. “This little lady right here.” He put his arm out to touch her hand.

“And what’s her name?”

Tom looked at the doctor again, but this time his face dropped. The thick waves of hair, the dimple in her cheeks, the way she seemed to sway to the side—none of it was familiar. His eyes dimmed and his shoulders slumped.

A crushing pressure built up in the woman’s chest as Tom struggled to remember who she was. It was not the first time he had forgotten her name or called her someone else, but the blow was painful all the same.

“That’s Jessi,” he said, but the woman could hear the unease in his voice.

The woman stood behind Tom. She wanted to sit beside him, but at that moment it felt easier to stand and pace than to sit and do nothing.

“I’m Willow, your daughter,” she said. She put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up and smiled, but the corners of his smile didn’t touch his eyes. With her tanned skin and her dark eyes, she was a mirror image of her father, but there were always these moments where he didn’t recognize her.

“Oh, yes,” he said, but the confusion was still there.

“How has he been?” the doctor asked, this time turning to Willow.

“Same as always. Waking up in the middle of the night, forgetting things. We need to repeat a lot, but he’s still getting around fine. Sometimes he sings to himself, but I can’t always understand what he’s trying to say.”

“When he talks, does he slur?”

“No, not that I’ve noticed.”

The doctor shook his head and opened a file with Tom’s name written on the edges. Willow looked around the man’s office. Dr. Gadel. Esteemed researcher in neuroscience. Case study after case study, and here he was, looking for new patients willing to volunteer their bodies to science in a hope

that it would not only help them, but others.

"Well, as I'm sure you know, all of Tom's symptoms are signs of advanced Alzheimer's Disease. You're here to learn more about the clinical trial?"

"That's correct. My husband has been researching Alzheimer's on the side of his medical practice. He stumbled across some of your case studies in his research. We've tried a lot of things, but nothing seems to slow down the progression of the disease."

"Your father was diagnosed," Dr. Gadel looked down at the papers in front of him, "six years ago?"

"Yes, and the past year has been especially hard. He's been forgetting who people are, where he is. He's not himself anymore."

Willow placed her hand on her father's shoulder as she spoke. He smiled up at her, having no idea she was talking about him. That's how the conversations seemed to go in their house. Willow and her husband could talk about Tom for hours, just feet away from him, and he would never know.

"So you're considering having your father be a part of the clinical trial?"

Willow took a breath and pulled a chair out next to her father to sit. He stared at her wide-eyed, and for a moment, she let herself think he was still there. She looked into his chocolate brown eyes and felt herself reaching out to him. Did he know the decision she was forced to make?

"My father has been sick for a long time," she said, still looking at him. He blinked back, lost in some other world. She looked at the wrinkles around his eyes, the way his shoulders fell forward. "There are some moments when he speaks and it's like I have my father back. Maybe a memory has sparked in him, or me, or maybe both of us, but in that moment, I'm not wondering if my father is going to be okay." Willow stopped to take a breath and turned toward the doctor. The corners of his mouth were inching down, his body completely still. "But those moments are becoming far and few. It doesn't feel like he's there anymore."

As soon as she said the words, she felt as if she needed to take them back. Of course, her father was there. She held his hand, his cold and fragile hand, but the man she knew growing up? Where had he gone?

"You want your father back," Dr. Gadel said.

"I'm afraid there's not much else to hold onto."

"I can't make any guarantees the trial will work," he said. "In fact, I can't say it won't make him worse. Everyone is different, but I will do everything in my power to make sure your father is a good match for this trial before we move forward. This means blood tests, MRIs, anything that can tell us as much as possible as to how your father's brain works. But even then, there are some things we can't predict."

"I understand," Willow said. She looked at her father, but he was staring at his hands.

"The trial is for a new drug I've been working on. It's part of an experiment that has been touched upon by scientists from around the world, but it originated in New Zealand. It started as a way to develop a sort of anti-venom for Alzheimer's, but before you can develop an anti-venom, you must first have a venom. Naturally, a disease has no venom. What the scientists in New Zealand were working on was a venom-like solution that replicated the effects of Alzheimer's."

"Is that possible?" Willow ran through her years of nursing school knowledge on how venoms

and poisons and diseases worked, but each seemed to be a separate entity. However, Willow knew that all it took to counteract a venom was to find the matching anti-venom. Could it be that simple?

"They created a serum. It was injected into sheep, mice, anything that would allow scientists to directly observe the effects of Alzheimer's on the brain—granted, not a human brain."

Every muscle in Willow's body tensed, and she reached out for her father's hand before Tom had a chance to know what was going on. She could picture her father in an examination room, a faceless figure standing close by ready to make an injection. What would it do to him? She stood up from her chair, and Tom looked back at her, his mouth gaping open. He was not an animal to be tested on.

"Willow, please sit. I'm not suggesting we do this type of experiment on your father."

Her heart beat against her chest, and her blood pulsed at her temples. If her father hadn't been there with her, she would have left the room before he had a chance to say anything else.

"I'm talking about a new serum that was created as a direct result of the anti-venom that was produced. They observed the animals that had been injected with the venom, studied their brains, the effects and why it affected it, and then created an anti-venom after years of study."

A thin layer of sweat was still coating Willow's skin. She looked at her father, the dazed look in his eyes, and sat back down.

"Did the anti-venom work?" she asked.

"It did," Dr. Gadel said.

"But it only stops the progression of the disease."

"In some cases, the brain was able to recover and return to a normal state, as if they had never been injected with a venom in the first place."

Her breath caught and tears sparked her eyes. When she'd walked into the appointment today, she had told herself one thing: do not hope for results. She covered her face with her hands and put her elbows on the table. What he was saying, it wasn't supposed to be possible. After years and years of working in a hospital, she knew that there were just some things you could not fix. But could she be wrong?

"What would my father be doing?" she asked.

"He'd be injected with an anti-venom, Derilum. I've been working with a team of doctors to produce this drug, and it's been approved for clinical trials. When I met your husband at a conference in Boston, I was presenting the drug to a panel, and he approached me afterwards asking for my card. He had read some of my research articles on the project."

Willow nodded her head. Randy had given her Dr. Gadel's card as soon as he got home from the conference, but she had been afraid to call. It had sat at the bottom of her purse for a week before she called to make an appointment.

"Do you really think it would help?"

She felt a spark of life that she hadn't felt in months. She never dared to let herself hope. Each doctor appointment ended in disappointment, but a flutter in her chest told her to stay.

"I think it could save your father's life."

Chapter 2

Sam was coughing when she woke up. The alarm clock in her room read 3:21am, and when she looked past it, she thought she could see thick, black smoke filling the air.

She pushed her cover away and ran across the room, pulling her door open as more smoke piled in. Her thin cotton pajamas felt thick in the heat of the room. Sam wanted to run through the hallway, to the stairs that would lead her to the entrance of her house. Instead, she found herself standing at the doorway, turning her back to the thick smoke that was curling around her body. Her parents. Avery. Were they already out of the house? She put a foot forward, back in the direction of the stairs, but the smoke filtered through her lungs until coughing was the only thing left she could do. The fire alarm in the house blared, the only sound she could hear until her ears began to ring.

Sam knelt to the floor, pulling her t-shirt up to cover her nose and mouth, but it did little to filter the smoke. She wanted to scream out, to see if her family was still in the building, but any move to make a sound only left Sam struggling to breathe.

Sam covered her ears to block the sound of the alarm, but she could swear she could hear something far in the distance, a thud – like someone was walking up the stairs. She crawled across the floor, her eyes watering from the smoke. She closed her eyes, begging the stinging sensation to go away. Everything felt like it was on fire, but she didn't see the fire yet. There were no flames, just the heat and the suffocating smoke. She put her hands out, feeling her way in the darkness. She took shallow breaths, looking for clean air but never daring to look up. When she inhaled the thick trails of smoke, it became difficult to even cough.

"She's here!" a rough, muffled voice said. Or at least that's what Sam thought she heard. Her hands were shaking when he found her. Thick arms wrapped around her and under her legs until she was off the ground. Sam reached out and tried to speak to the man, to tell him her parents and sister were somewhere. She tried pointing in the direction of their rooms.

"It's okay," the man said, his voice muffled through a large respirator mask. His jacket had a light that flickered, the only brightness in the smoke. The man carried Sam down the stairs. The sound of his breathing through the respirator was the only comforting sound inside the burning building. As he carried her down the stairs, the air grew dense and the smoke grew thicker. The fire was just around the corner, and as the flames grew higher, they seemed to possess their own sound of screeching as they ate away at the home. Memories of her life begged for escape as they were forever lost in the billows of smoke.

The flames blazed a magnificent orange until it was the only thing Sam could see. She was inches from the door in the arms of her savior. She wanted to run out of the house, but with each breath she took, the farther away the doorway seemed. By now, she had no oxygen; she was just a ragdoll in the fireman's arms.

There were other voices in the house, all just as muffled as the man who carried Sam. The team of firefighters rushed to find anyone trapped inside the house and to put out the flames that flowed from the kitchen and took over the home. The flames reflected off the masks of the firefighters, and the men

seemed to blend into the chaos. It was a dance between fire and man. Each lick of the flame brought a renewed sense of urgency as they rushed to quell the fire.

"I've got her!" the man carrying Sam shouted as he stepped through the doorway and away from the fire.

The air cooled the instant the firefighter stepped through the doorway, but when he looked at Sam, she was limp in his arms. There was a thin coating of ash on her skin and pajamas, and the EMTs rushed around her, pulling her onto a stretcher and holding a respirator over her mouth. Bodies crowded around the young girl as they checked her vitals, and she was laid out on the stretcher. The team talked in rushed voices, operating as one to bring life back to Sam.

Avery was still coughing when she broke through the barrier of smoke. The moment she felt the fresh air on her face, she wanted to collapse to the ground, but her lungs wanted to cave in on themselves, making it impossible for her to catch her breath. Her eyes watered as a firefighter led her to the ambulance, and she was placed on a stretcher.

"Just lie down," a voice said.

Avery looked at the woman whose hand was on her arm. Her grip was gentle as she kept Avery on the gurney, and an oxygen mask was slipped over her face. The stream of air felt too cold, and she pulled the mask from her face.

"Sweetie, you need that," the EMT said. She placed the mask on with gentle hands but tightened the elastic so it wouldn't come off as easily.

"Where're my parents?" Avery said. She tried to sit up, but the woman pinned her in place.

"Don't worry, we'll find them," was all the woman said as she hovered over Avery's body.

More EMTs rushed to her side, taking vitals, poking and prodding at her until she couldn't keep track of how many people were standing around her anymore. Through the mass of bodies, she saw Sam laying on the stretcher across from her with no sign of life.

"Sam?" Avery screamed, but her voice didn't have the power. Instead, her words were rasping against her throat.

"It's all right, she's going to be fine." A woman stepped in front of Avery's vision so she couldn't see her sister. Avery sat, holding the respirator to her mouth, her breathing fogging the plastic cover over her face.

Avery looked around in the dead night, her house a candle in the dark. Snow fell around the scene, a peaceful blanket coating the chaos. The lights from the firetrucks and ambulance flashed across the neighborhood as people slipped out of their houses to see what all the commotion was. Faces watched from the border of the scene as their neighbors' house was engulfed in flames, a blazing light in the otherwise dark night.

"There we go." Amidst the chaos, those were the words Avery heard. Just a whisper. They came from the EMT standing over Sam. There was a deep, damaged wheezing sound, and when Avery looked over, Sam's body was moving again, her chest heaving with each breath of air. The team of EMTs moved, blocking her vision and making it impossible to see Sam from the waist up, but she was there. Fire hoses were pulled into place, and water was poured over their home. Sam's cough was a comfort.

And then Sam was being rolled away. Avery was on one stretcher and Sam on another, and each were being pulled in opposite directions until Sam disappeared behind the doors of an ambulance. Sam

was sealed away, leaving Avery in a sea of strangers.

“Wait,” Avery said. Her voice was softer than a whisper. Through the fire of the night, the click of the doors of the ambulance echoed through the air. “Wait!” This time Avery could hear her voice. The first snow of the season glittered on the ground. She should be cold in the freezing night, but the fire held her too close.

“It’s gonna be okay, we’re getting you to the hospital,” an EMT said. He stood beside her, his body moving in rhythm with the rest of his team. His voice was calm. Tears pooled in Avery’s eyes, but she wasn’t sure if it was because of the smoke or because Sam was out of sight and her parents were nowhere to be seen.

“Sam’s in that ambulance, let me go in that ambulance!” The man Avery had just spoken to was no longer listening. He was talking to the other EMTs in code or words that she didn’t understand.

“Where are my parents?” Her eyes kept going to the man that had spoken to her. He worked on putting ointment on a burn that was on her leg—she hadn’t even felt it. It seemed her whole body was on fire.

“The firemen are working on rescuing whoever they find in the house,” he said, rubbing the cool ointment into her skin. Avery stared at her scorched leg; it shined where he put on the ointment.

“It was just us in the house. Me, my parents, and my sister, Sam.” Avery watched the other EMTs float in and out of her vision. She was in the ambulance now, still on the stretcher. The doors were open, leaving room for anyone else the fireman might find. They needed to find someone else. They needed to find her parents.

Avery watched outside the door as the firemen worked far off into the flames. They poured gallons upon gallons of water onto her home, washing the house away, until all that was left to see was rubble. The flames didn’t want to die. Avery imagined the fire hose freezing in the cold air, but the flames never being extinguished.

Then there was another stretcher. Without even realizing it, Avery’s dad was pulled in, and the moment she saw him, she wished she hadn’t.

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From the outside, Massachusetts’s Dover Memorial Hospital seemed quiet. The night was dark, but the building was bright. Patients inside were calm; most had long been asleep, yet miles away, a house was on fire. There were still flames trying to fight their way to grow and destroy. The fire had started in the kitchen, though no one knew that just yet. It would be hours, days even, before the fire marshal found the cause. Until then, there was just smoke and flames and ash.

The drive was short, but to Avery it seemed to last hours. She closed her eyes as two EMTs worked in the small space, making sure her father could breathe. The sound of lungs fighting to breathe echoed in her mind. When they carted her out of the ambulance, there were tears staining her face.

“Dad?” she tried to say, as cold air coated her skin until goosebumps formed where the burns had taken residence. A nurse heard her and took her hand as her father was taken away by another team of nurses.

“He’s going to be okay, sweetheart.” Avery didn’t see the nurse that spoke to her. Everything was moving around her, and she wasn’t sure where she was. She was rolled into the hospital, past other moaning patients in the emergency room. Her dad was no longer with her; Sam was nowhere in sight.

Another small spark of panic ignited as she realized she hadn't seen her mom since before she had gone to bed.

The nurse never let go of her hand, but she didn't speak up again. The lights in the hallways were too white, but when Avery closed her eyes, all she could see were flames. Cold, crisp teardrops left cool trails of relief against her burnt skin. She couldn't breathe through the tears, and coughing followed soon afterwards. With each cough, her body lifted, her muscles taut.

"It's okay, just breathe." It was the nurse again. This time, Avery could see her, her dark hair coiled in braids. The woman held up the respirator again—Avery hadn't realized she had dropped it.

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Sam was on the other side of the hospital, conscious, but just barely. Streaks of blond hair were strewn across the pillow, sprinkled with ash. The stench of smoke coated the room. There was one nurse who seemed to hover over her the most. She didn't speak to her patient as she worked in quick, thorough movements. Her hair was pulled back into a braid, thick curls poking out around her face.

"Come on," she mumbled to herself. She hooked Sam up to an IV; the girl hung on by a thread. There was a slow drip as the liquid made its way into Sam's bloodstream. There were other nurses rushing around the room trying to keep Sam alive. She was no longer coughing, but her breathing was shallow. There was a constant supply of rich oxygen to her lungs, machines and tubes running across her body, burying her under the life-saving devices.

"We have an identification on her," another nurse said, rushing into the room. She held the chart full of Sam's information pulled up on the computer, from her vitals to her weight. Sam Ellison, age 16. It was simple information, but with that, she was more than just a patient. She was someone with a family, with a story.

"Willow, is she stable yet?"

Willow tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear. "Almost," she said, staring at the machine that read Sam's vitals. "Come on."

Sam was pale in her bed, paler even with the dark soot staining her face. There were lines of clean skin around her eyes from where tears overflowed from coughing.

"Do we know where her parents are yet?" Willow asked.

"Not yet, but the EMTs on the scene said they pulled two adults out of the fire—most likely her parents," the other nurse said. She put Sam's chart back in place at the edge of her bed and moved to leave the room.

"Wait," Willow said. She held Sam's wrist, a habit that'd formed over the years from always having to check for a pulse. "What condition are they in?"

The nurse shook her head as she stepped out the door. "Not good."

Chapter 3

7 months ago

It's okay," Randy said. The waiting room was long left behind, and now Willow stood in the doctor's office. Tom was sitting on the cushioned bed, paper crunching beneath him.

"I'm just not sure," Willow said. She was on the phone with her husband, Randy, trying not to pace in the small room. When she had checked her father in for his appointment, a nurse came in to check his vitals. Now, she was left to fill out one final piece of paperwork to say Dr. Gadel would not be held responsible for any side-effects during the use of Derilum.

"How's your dad?"

Tom was sitting, his back hunched forward. The corners of his mouth were pinched down, not because he was upset, but because he wasn't happy. It was one of those days Willow could look at her father and not recognize him.

"He's fine."

"What's your gut telling you?" Randy said.

Willow's hands shook as she held the phone. She tightened her grip.

"My gut is telling me we don't have a lot of options." "Do you remember what your father told you when he first got diagnosed?" he said.

When Willow looked over at her father, his lips were moving in a soft rhythm like he was singing, but no sound came out. His eyes were fixed on the floor.

"He said, 'Don't let my disease become your disease,'" she said, repeating her father's words. The moment felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

"He'd want this for himself and for you, despite the risks."

Willow hung onto Randy's words. She blinked, and a tear ran down her cheek. She brushed it away before her father could see, though she knew the chances of him noticing were slim.

"I know," Willow said, her words on the verge of a cry.

"I love you," Randy said. His voice was soft, and when Willow closed her eyes, she could imagine they were both home and she was in his arms, away from this hospital.

"I love you, too," she whispered.

"Good luck, sweetheart. You're doing your father well."

She tried to nod with his words and looked to her father. Tom lifted his head slightly and looked at her, but his eyes were lost.

"I'll talk to you when I get home," Willow said, a moment before the call ended.

The silence that remained after she hung up the phone felt heavy. A clipboard sat on the counter, a paper held in place with a blank line for a signature at the bottom. She took the pen the nurse had given her, and with all the care she could muster, she signed her name. She expected the moment to feel final, but the weight in her chest did not lift.

A knock at the door sounded a moment before Dr. Gadel walked into the room.

“Good morning, Willow. Good morning, Tom,” he said, turning to each of them and foaming his hands with sanitizer by the door. His eyes passed over the clipboard with Willow’s signature. He took it and sat in the chair across from Tom. A nurse slipped in through the door, pushing a small tray with implements toward Dr. Gadel.

“Thank you, Lisa,” he said before the nurse left the room. “Did you have any questions?”

He turned to Willow after he looked over the paper. She had signed everywhere she needed to. All that was left was to inject Tom with the serum and observe what happened.

“How long will it take to see results?”

“Well, assuming it works, it would be as soon as twenty-four hours that your father’s brain cells stop dying. From there, we can hope they begin to grow back and multiply like healthy cells. We’ll have to coach your father and bring him back up to speed. He can’t re-gain memories that he’s already lost, but we can certainly help him retain new memories.”

“Okay,” she said. She was afraid to look at her father and know that what he’d lost was forever gone.

“Do you still want to do this?” Dr. Gadel stood from his chair and rolled the tray closer to him. Implements were arranged across the tray in a perfect order. There was gauze, a syringe, dressing tape, alcohol wipes, and most importantly, a clear purple liquid in a vile.

“I’m sure.” Willow stepped toward her father and took his arm. He looked back at her, and Willow could imagine her father the way he used to be. If he were there, he would have smiled in that moment.

Dr. Gadel slipped on rubber gloves and brought the tray over to Tom.

“Dad,” Willow said. “Dr. Gadel is going to give you a quick little shot.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tom said. He put his hand out to dismiss her away. When he did, her eye caught sight of the purple bruise on the top of his hand from the IV he had a few days ago when he came in for a test. Purple also skirted the inside of his elbow where a nurse had drawn blood from his arm. The bruised skin cried out for help.

Test after test, all in caution of Derilum. And somehow, each test came out negative. No adverse effects predicted. But there was always a chance.

“Alright, Tom, I hope you don’t mind shots.” Dr. Gadel used an alcohol wipe to sanitize a portion of his arm. Tom didn’t say anything as Dr. Gadel worked. He watched Dr. Gadel moving, his sight never straying. Could he remember being prodded by a needle just a few days ago?

Gadel filled the syringe with the purple liquid. It almost glowed in the stark white of the room. His hands worked fast and fluid as he stuck the needle in Tom’s arm. Tom didn’t flinch or look away. It was Willow who took a step back.

“I love you,” she whispered to him. His eyes didn’t lift to meet hers. “You’re doing so well.”

She saw the fluid drain into her father’s skin, and from there, there was no going back.

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