

INSANE TAKES ON A NEW MEANING
AS THEY UNEARTH A SCANDAL THAT
SOMEONE'S WILLING TO KILL FOR TO KEEP SECRET

VIPER'S NEST

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Dedication

This one is for Blairzybear and my sweet Supper Club girlfriends: Nancy, Jana, Ginger, and Linda. Always save room for dessert!

1

Certainly there would be ghosts, even in broad daylight.

That was Wren Bergschneider's first thought as she stared at the ominous, ramshackle exterior of the state hospital, nearly two centuries old. Crunching across the carpet of fallen leaves, she tried to keep up with Professor Allan Partner, her employer, as he strolled around the exterior of the imposing structure taking photos.

The edifice loomed over them, while Allan made a large, safe orbit, as if he feared the condemned building would suddenly suck them in.

Jacksonville Insane Asylum. The words engraved in stone over the main entrance were no longer politically correct. Decayed, uninviting, and slated for demolition, the old place looked just like every asylum depicted in those old black-and-white horror movies.

"Look at those windows," Allan told her, pointing his digital camera for a shot.

Wren glanced up. She thought of all the faces that must have once peered down to where she now stood. Sad, confused, guilty, young, and even vengeful faces, old and hopeless ones, too. How had those patients coped? She thought particularly of the women who suffered from what doctors now call postpartum depression, PMS, and various other hormonal imbalances. Confinement in places such as this had

been their treatment in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.

"I keep thinking of Nellie Bly," she told him.

"So you finished reading *Ten Days in A Madhouse?*" Allan looked over his shoulder and quirked an eyebrow.

Wren nodded. In 1888, the famous New York journalist had willingly allowed herself to be committed to a mental institution such as this one on Blackwell's Island. According to a plan devised by Nellie and her editor, Bly had feigned mental illness and was promptly declared insane by six doctors, who had examined her on the court's behalf. She was duly admitted to Blackwell's and for ten days endured a horrible nightmare. When her editor finally arranged for her release, Nellie wrote a startling feature article about the conditions at the asylum, which resulted in a grand jury investigation. The spunky Miss Bly later wrote a book about her unforgettable adventure.

"And now you're following in her footsteps," Allan said with a half smile.

"Hardly! I'm not that daring," Wren admitted. Once, she'd considered herself to be, if not daring, at least strong and capable. But since the death of her husband, Peter, last year in a car accident, she felt rather weak and vulnerable. Only the necessity of caring for her eight-year-old daughter kept her from succumbing to fear about her future.

For Pippi's sake, Wren purposely got up out of bed each morning, praying that God would help her get through another day. But her resolve had been somewhat shaken after she'd received the anonymous letter last week. It had not been threatening in any way, yet it seemed suggestively sinister. She'd meant

to show it to her boss, to ask his opinion about what she should do, but the time never seemed to be quite right.

"There's Mr. Gorse," she said, touching Allan on the arm to get his attention.

He turned. Wren noted again what a handsome man her boss was. With his dark, wavy hair, slight moustache, and brilliant blue eyes, he appeared more the male model type than a history professor. As usual, he wore his light brown corduroy jacket with the patches at the elbow. Allan wore it so often, Wren had come to think of it as his work uniform.

Allan glanced at his watch. "Promptly at 1:00, as promised."

Wren watched the comptroller of the county's developmental center taking purposeful strides toward them. This was the man with the keys to the condemned asylum. With his lanky legs and a protruding Adam's apple near the base of his skinny neck, Gorse resembled one of the exaggerated stock characters in a Dickens novel. Even his name—Ichabod Matthew Gorse—sounded like something Dickens would have used.

"Dr. Partner, I hope I haven't kept you waiting," Gorse said, extending a thin, pale hand. He spoke in a slightly breathless manner.

"No, you're right on time," Allan assured him. The two men shook hands. "This is my research assistant, Mrs. Wren Bergschneider."

Gorse swiveled his protruding eyes in her direction.

"Wren, please," she told him with a shy but politely professional smile.

The man merely nodded and then turned back to

Allan. "I've read your books, of course. The one about the history of rabies was particularly intriguing. I believe you're working on another. Is that why you've requested a tour of the old asylum?" Gorse regarded Allan expectantly.

"Yes, I'm writing a biography of the humanitarian, Dorothea Dix. As you know, this asylum"—Allan flicked a thumb toward the sprawling building—"was the offshoot of her impassioned plea to Illinois legislators in the year 1842, to provide proper care for the insane. With its brick exterior and Greek Revival architecture, it's typical of the institutions built during Dix's period of reform, and it's the last one still standing."

Gorse shrugged off his lack of interest in one easy gesture, while taking a swipe at his thinning hair.

Wren had the impression Gorse didn't really care why they'd come to see the old place, but was curious how Allan had succeeded in pulling the necessary strings to do so when the asylum was scheduled to be demolished in just two weeks' time.

She'd wondered a bit about that, too. Allan had seemed particularly keen on getting inside the old institution before it was dismantled, even though she'd mentioned there were many interior as well as exterior photographs available through the historical archives. When she'd told him it wasn't really necessary to tour the old building, Allan had declared, "It is to me."

"Let's get started, then," Gorse said, producing a ring of jangling keys from his jacket pocket. He led the way across the leaf-covered lawn to a side entrance in the main asylum building. The key rattled in the stiff lock. When the door finally opened, it did so with a rusty groan.

Stepping inside, Wren noticed how her breath congealed into wispy little ghosts, which seemed to eagerly float away. She shuddered and flicked her long ponytail over her shoulder.

"Frightened?" Allan whispered playfully, his lips near her ear. She caught a whiff of his spicy aftershave.

"Cold," Wren replied tartly. She felt embarrassed that he would consider her so timid. She wasn't afraid, not really. Once upon a time, when Peter was alive, she would have considered this sort of exploration a thrilling adventure. Now, she felt somewhat anxious. What if she stumbled and broke a leg? What if decayed timbers crashed upon their heads?

Pippi would be devastated if anything happened to her mother. The child still had occasional nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night crying out for her father.

Wren couldn't afford to be careless.

"Watch your step," Gorse warned, leading the way around dark cavities in the floorboards. "Follow me upstairs."

Allan smiled and waited for Wren to precede him. As she firmly clutched the stair railing, she noted that it felt somewhat sticky. She wondered about all the other hands that had clung to this very same railing over the years. Unexpectedly, the stairs led to a large, sun-splashed ballroom, complete with bandstand and a balcony. For a moment, Wren could almost imagine the music. Music that hath charms to soothe the savage breast...beast...even the insane.

Silent, Gorse stood beside the head of the staircase as she and Allan walked around the center of the dance floor. While Allan snapped photos, Wren surveyed the shreds of rotten curtain material which still clung to

the lean, skeletal windows. She noted a huge hook dangling from the water-stained ceiling. Presumably, the hook once held a fashionable chandelier that had sparkled over the dance floor in ages past. She touched a vintage radiator, almost expecting it to hiss with warmth.

Gorse, she noted with a sidelong glance, gazed absently out the window, his hands thrust into the pockets of his khaki chinos.

"This must be where the residents held dances and band practice," Allan supposed.

Gorse nodded. "Music therapy was considered of vital importance for the residents. There was a choir and folk dancing, too. However, in the nineteenth century, the dances were segregated. A mingling of the sexes was not permitted." He gave them a thin smile.

"It was assumed that crazy people could outbreed everyone else, so they weren't allowed to touch one another," Allan told Wren. "Segregation was an absolute must."

"Mere superstition," Gorse replied in a dismissive way. "Before the hospital closed down, the social hour was for both men and women—together."

Wren nodded and then followed the men out of the sunny ballroom, down a dim corridor to a bleak, utilitarian room with tiled walls and exposed plumbing.

"This room was used for hydrotherapy," Gorse explained. "The tubs are all gone now, but at one time, patients were given special baths in here. They would be strapped into the tubs, and the water temperature would alternate between steaming and frigid. The subdued patients would then be removed to tables over here, packed with pounds of ice and wrapped like

mummies in several wet sheets."

"For what purpose?" Wren wanted to know.

"It kept the patients sedated," Allan informed her with a frown. "It was the prescribed method before tranquilizers were invented."

"You are correct," Gorse said.

"Did a physician have to prescribe such treatment?" Wren asked, looking from one man to the other.

Gorse paused significantly before replying. "Sometimes, if a patient didn't toe the line, so to speak, he or she would be thrown into the hydros."

Wren experienced a pang of sympathy for the asylum's long-ago nonconformists, as she followed Gorse and Allan through long, naked passageways and up another flight of stairs to the wards.

"I once worked here as an orderly during the 1960s," Gorse volunteered. "The patient population peaked at more than three thousand people then, and the beds were packed together in the hall, because the rooms were already filled. Once, the fire alarm went off, and the only way to get out of the ward was to walk across all those beds." He indulged in a dry, reminiscent chuckle.

"How many patients were there usually?" Wren asked.

"Too many," Gorse replied. "They were always lined up against the wall for something or other. They lined up for cigarette allowances, to eat in the dining halls or to get clean clothing. They even lined up to take showers. Once, the fire department came through making a routine safety inspection and there were all these naked women lined up in the halls without towels or anything, just waiting for their turn in the

showers.”

Embarrassed, Wren shifted her glance in Allan’s direction. She felt mildly puzzled when she noted the glint of anger in his eyes, the flush on his cheeks. Clearly, something Gorse said had disturbed him. She couldn’t imagine what. Allan had been researching mental institutions for years, in preparation for writing the Dix biography, certainly long before she’d been hired as his assistant. Surely none of this information was new to him.

She glanced down. “The hardwood floors are beautiful, even now.”

“They kept them well polished, too,” Gorse replied with a twisted grin. “The patients scrubbed the floors each week and then waxed them. Do you know how?”

“Tell us,” Wren prompted.

“They’d wrap towels around some guy’s arms and legs and also around his middle. Then they’d pull him up and down the floor until it had been polished to perfection.”

Wren grimaced.

The flush in Allan’s cheeks deepened. He seemed lost in private thoughts of his own. Something was definitely wrong.

She wondered if she should give up the idea of showing him the anonymous letter. From her oversized shoulder bag, she retrieved a pen and a spiral-bound memo pad and began to make some notes.

Allan, who owned every imaginable modern gadget, had laughed the first time he’d seen her taking notes the old-fashioned way—in shorthand. He’d even called Wren a Luddite, whatever that was. She’d meant

to look up the definition online. But Allan told her he didn't care what she used, as long as the work got done. Wren assured him it would. She needed this job. The hours were flexible, and the pay more substantial than she could earn as a substitute teacher or a file clerk. Peter's life insurance policy had been a small one and not nearly adequate enough to allow Wren to stay home with Pippi full-time. Oh, yes, she needed this job all right.

"I'm assuming the residents did most of the work here," Allan said then, addressing Gorse.

The man nodded. "They worked in the kitchen and in the garden. They did the laundry too, forty-four tons a week, and they made their own clothes, washed the dishes, did the dusting—just about everything."

"Were they paid?" Wren asked.

"Yes, with cigarettes and soda money. Work therapy, you know, was considered to be quite important. Everybody had chores to do."

"In an institution like this, treatment was rare," Allan put in, addressing her this time. His tone seemed tinged with bitterness. "Boredom could actually become a health hazard. No one was cured here. This was nothing more than a human warehouse."

"I won't discuss treatment." Gorse's curt reply was followed by a long, awkward silence.

Wren peered inside one of the small rooms designed to accommodate two patients. It was not much bigger than the size of her bathroom at home, with one very small window.

"There are bars on the windows," Allan observed over her shoulder.

"No, those aren't bars, but merely wooden sashes," Gorse hastened to point out.

Moving toward the nearest window, Wren peered down through the dubious wooden window sashes at the spacious lawn dotted with gazebos and the remains of a once-splendid fountain. She knew that representatives from the Smithsonian Institute would be arriving in the next couple of days to carefully dismantle one of those gazebos and ship it back to Washington, D.C. It was a long way down to where the stately oak trees still performed silent sentry duty.

The breathless, unexpected sensation of falling, washed over Wren. She put her hand upon the windowsill to steady herself. She had a sudden disconcerting thought. "Has anybody ever jumped from here?" she asked.

Gorse didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Sure," he replied, without providing any details.

Wren experienced a rush of sadness. Turning away from the window, she made her way to the head of stairs, where Allan stood lost in thought.

He took her by the arm. "Lean over the railing," he said softly.

She complied hesitantly. The visual vortex of four flights of stairs was dizzying.

"I was standing down there once when a woman jumped from right where you are standing now," Gorse said. "She nearly landed on me."

Wren shivered, pulling away from the railing. "Was she killed?"

"No, she lived," Allan spoke up, his tone brittle.

Gorse arched an eyebrow. "Yes, she did. How did you know?"

After a moment's pause, Allan said dryly, "I'm a history professor."

Wren sensed there was more to it than that.

Something was definitely eating at her boss. She would ask him about it later. "May we see the kitchen?" she asked, hopefully.

Gorse glanced at Allan and raised his eyebrows.

Allan nodded.

"All right, then follow me," Gorse said. "The kitchen is located in the complex out back."

~*~

Allan found the old building to be quietly oppressive. As they retraced their steps down shadowy corridors and a confusing array of staircases, he noticed a closed door with a tarnished doorplate that read REMOTIVATION COORDINATOR. His jaw clenched as he pondered the sorts of sinister things the term could imply in an institution such as this. Why had he insisted on coming here? What had he hoped to find?

Once outside, Gorse carefully locked the door behind them before leading the way to the door of the nearby kitchen complex.

"Is everything OK?" Wren asked in a quiet undertone as they watched Gorse fumble with the jangling key ring. She looked up at him, her troubled, amber-colored eyes searching his face. A frown puckered her smooth forehead. She flipped her strawberry-blonde ponytail over her shoulder. "You seem angry or upset or something." Her voice remained quiet.

"I'm fine," he reassured her with a half smile. "Lots on my mind, that's all." He marveled—and not for the first time—that his pretty research assistant had such a highly developed sense of intuition. It had

proved to be quite useful in his research thus far. Whenever Wren followed up on one of her hunches, she usually succeeded in digging up some little known resource or a bit of overlooked historical information, which he found invaluable in his work. He was glad to have found her through a friend of a friend.

"Here we go," Gorse called back over his shoulder after opening another groaning door.

Allan jerked his chin upward, encouraging Wren to go ahead of him. As they followed Gorse into what had once been an enormous, bustling kitchen, they crunched their way across broken glass and layers of discarded newspapers. Pausing in front of the huge, stainless steel utility tables, Gorse related details of dinners served long ago.

"Every day, seven hundred fifty loaves of bread were baked in this kitchen. Six cows a week were slaughtered and served, along with sixteen hogs. A four-hundred-acre vegetable garden once provided the kitchen staff with fresh produce. The surplus was canned and saved for the long, fruitless winter months. At one time, approximately twelve thousand five hundred meals per day were served here." Gorse ran a tentative finger across his scalp, while Wren scribbled more notes.

Allan thought the man sounded like a promotional brochure. "Where are the food tunnels?" he asked impatiently. Almost everyone living in Jacksonville seemed able and willing to relate exaggerated tales of terror and rape, torture and deprivation that took place in these infamous passageways.

As though able to read his mind, Gorse cleared his throat and glared. "There are those who like to think that the residents were chained to the walls down there

and locked up for days in the storage rooms, but it's simply not true." His tone dripped with disdain and dared defiance.

Allan didn't believe him—not entirely. From his extensive research, he knew Dorothea Dix had found many poor souls caged and imprisoned in almshouses and jails. Victims were often chained, starved, even tortured. He'd discovered historical records which revealed how such deplorable treatment was the acceptable practice throughout the United States in the nineteenth century. Why should circumstances have been any different here in Jacksonville, Illinois?

"I'd like to take a quick look," Allan said, plastering on a professional smile.

"Without flashlights—"

"I brought one," Wren spoke up, interrupting Gorse. She tugged a pink flashlight, graced with the image of one of the fairytale princesses, from her purse. With a sheepish grin, she held it out for Allan's perusal.

Good girl, he thought, grinning back at her. He pulled a small, but powerful square-shaped flashlight with a handle from the pocket of his corduroy jacket.

Gorse led them to the entrance of the underground tunnel system. "As I said, these are merely food tunnels, not dungeons," the man said stiffly. "Miniature railroad flatcars were used to transport food to the institution's various buildings."

Allan aimed his flashlight in the direction Gorse pointed and illuminated the tracks.

"Flatcars were rolled down this tunnel to the appropriate elevator, and then the food was sent to dining halls on each floor," Gorse continued.

Wren paused, as though hesitant to go any further

into the long, dark stretch ahead.

"It is simply a food tunnel," Gorse said sharply.

A food tunnel, to be sure, but Allan couldn't help wondering how many poor, unfortunate residents had been brought down here, and then forced to submit to sexual molestation in exchange for a handful of cigarettes or a clean handkerchief.

Wren sucked in a breath before taking a tentative step forward.

With his free hand, Allan gripped her elbow, intending to guide her through the long dark corridor. She flinched and slowly tugged her elbow from his grasp. Allan immediately regretted his helpful gesture. Had Wren taken it as patronizing or condescending? He certainly had not intended to offend her. He knew she was a bereaved widow with a little girl to support. He did not want to behave in a way she would consider disrespectful or too familiar.

The three of them walked along the dark corridor in silence.

Occasionally, Allan stepped to the side to investigate one of the many huge storage pantries located throughout the tunnel. For no apparent reason, an image of his lovely, sad-eyed mother—now long dead—came to mind. She'd died when he was seven years old, but her haunting face appeared as fresh and clear in his mind as though he'd seen her only yesterday. Unexpectedly, his pulse raced. His breath came in small, shallow spurts. *Get a grip*, he silently chided himself.

The floor of the tunnel was slippery with mud.

He stopped in his tracks, hesitant to go any further.

Wren, directly behind him, stopped too.

"Well, it's obvious that the sump pump is no longer working," Gorse announced. "I think we'd better go back now."

Allan shone the beam of his flashlight downward. His hiking boots were splattered with mud. The hem of Wren's jeans appeared wet and mud splattered as well. "What do you think?" he asked her, raising the flashlight so he could read the expression on her face. He wanted to go on, all the way to the end, but not if Wren appeared fearful. Having always considered himself to be a hard-hearted cynic, Allan was surprised by the pity and concern he felt for the young widow he now employed. Life had dealt her a sad blow. He didn't want to make things worse for her, especially as she'd been acting nervous of late. Edgy. Something was going on, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Although she appeared to be shivering from the cold, Wren fixed a brave smile on her face and regarded him with calm trust. "Can we go just a little bit further?" she asked.

Allan smiled at her with approval.

Gorse cleared his throat. "I wish you wouldn't. It isn't safe."

"You stay right there, Gorse," Allan advised, handing him his own flashlight. "We won't go too far. May I?" He held out his hand, indicating the pink princess one that Wren clutched in her right hand. "We'll walk down the middle of the rails," he told her, turning the beam downwards. "That should give us a bit of traction."

"Lead the way," Wren told him.

They moved forward, slowly, peering into the dark corridors. What he was looking for, Allan couldn't say. He didn't really know. "The asylum's