Chapter 1

It was hard to tell how much time had passed since Delany awoke in the dark. Maybe an hour? At first she’d figured her eyes would adjust to her surroundings but she wasn’t having much luck. Her arms and back were killing her, she tasted blood in her mouth and something was breathing in the blackness nearby.

Trying to remain calm, Delany tested her restraints. Her wrists were bound together with rope and as she struggled it dug into her skin. The blood was sticky between her fingers. Bits of dirt squished into the places where her skin had worn thin and it stung.

“Shit,” She mumbled. *Maybe more of that later.*

All around her was blackness. Focusing for a moment, she struggled to quiet her heartbeat. She tried to remember whether or not it was even possible to control the muscles of your heart. It felt like it was going to erupt from her chest. The blood pounding in her ears was deafening. Maybe it would be better not to think about her heart after all.

Something was dripping. *Concentrate on something useful.* She squinted in the direction of the sound but saw nothing beyond her own nose. Testing, she wiggled her bare feet against the floor. No, it wasn’t a floor. Her toes dug into soft soil. Was she even indoors? Her tan legs were tied together at the ankles leaving her to stretch out with both feet. Contact. Something hard and cold. A rock? Its surface was uneven to the touch.

Exasperated she sighed and fell onto her back. Staring into the blackness above and all around her she had to laugh at the circumstances. No idea where or why or how. Fucking classic.

“Um … hey,” she ventured quietly. “You awake over there?” she asked.

There was no response. The labored breathing continued beyond her view somewhere nearby. Was it even human? She hadn’t even considered that it might be her deranged captor.

But had she been captured? She couldn’t remember. It could be a bear for all she knew. Maybe she ought to stop kicking her feet and making noise. But if it wasn’t a bear she’d be a fool not to try to get some help.

As she was calming down she began to cool off. In fact, it was quite cold. Sweat stuck to her skin uncomfortably on her upper lip and between her legs. She was filthy, bleeding, bound, and she was not alone. The last thing she remembered … she couldn’t recall. Delany had gotten up in the morning and eaten half a grapefruit-- not that she was on a diet or anything but she was trying to eat more fruit and fewer bagels. Proverbially she was scratching her head, trying to figure out how it was that she could remember what she’d had for breakfast but not how she’d ended up here. She closed her eyes and thought about bagels hungrily.

“Hey, you don’t have anything to eat do you?” she asked the motionless shape. There was no response. *Fine*, she thought, *be that way*.

Struggling to wriggle across the ground like an inch worm she worked her way toward the sound of breathing. She drew her feet close to her body then, lifting her butt barely off the ground she dug her feet in and thrust backward along the dirt floor. After a few passes at bringing her feet to her ass and shoving off she got pretty good. She was making decent time, occasionally pausing to listen again for the sound then adjusting her trajectory and flinging herself toward it. It took her all of five minutes before she came crashing into the motionless figure which was the source of the sound.

Delany came down on the body with a thud, her bound hands making contact just before she fell on it. It was soft but not warm. She made every effort to get her hands free to examine it but it was no use. She rocked forward to get her hands behind her knees and step through her arms. It was a trick she’d used once to get comfortable while wearing handcuffs in public. Her shoulders were immediately relieved. Had her arms been tied higher up the maneuver would have been impossible. Someone hadn’t figured she’d be so nimble when she woke up. It made her feel a little better, like she was already beating the odds.

The ribs on her right side sang out in sharp pain as she got a full breath. *Something’s broken.*

On her elbows and knees she bent closer to the sound of air jaggedly moving through the stinking, fleshy mass. She reached out to touch it. Clothes. Ok. Someone was in here with her. And it was not a bear. More good news, she thought. Until she felt where the motionless figure’s face she have been. There was a thick layer of something crusty that Delany couldn’t help but assume was congealed blood and scabs. Gently she felt around for signs of a nose and found only a crushed cavity with air escaping in gurgles. It was a woman. Delany touched the slender lower lip and pointed chin.

“Oh my god,” she choked, “what’ve they done to you?” *Probably the same things they’re going to do to me*. A bead of cold sweat slipped down her spine and she shivered. For the first time since she woke she was really afraid.

A weak gasp broke the silence.

“Jesus Christ-,” Delany had the presence of mind of cup her hands over her mouth. The hallowed name echoed around the chamber for several seconds. As she tried to understand the vastness around her she felt the girl’s fingernails clutching at her arm. The torn nails ripped at her skin. She thought she could see the whites of the girl’s eyes but it might have been a trick of the dark. Matrixing.

“Stop,” she whispered, “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

The girl was more alert now- she was clawing at Delany’s face and wrapping her gnarled fingers in Delany’s hair.

“It’s ok,” she pled, “Shh!” Delany whipped her head around looking for any indication that someone might have heard the commotion.

“Ch-k” the girl hacked up the sound.

Something warm and wet hit Delany’s face and she flinched.

“I can help you,” she said, but she wasn’t sure about that. She grabbed the girl’s wrists and held them tight to keep her from scratching. She shrugged her shoulder to her cheek to wipe at the expectorant.

“K … k…”

“Please just settle down,” she begged.

“K …”

“What? What?” she leaned down toward the hole where the girl’s nose has once been. She was close enough to her mouth to feel the warm on her cheek.

“Ki- kill me.” The girl finally spat.

Delany shook her head from side to side.

“No, shhh,” she cooed gripping the girl’s wrists tightly, “It’s gonna be ok. You aren’t alone now.”

She wasn’t sure why she said that. Would it be better not to be alone?

“K-kill …”

“Stop it!” Delany interrupted.

“Kill eee,” the girl hissed, “’lease … l-klees …”

Tears were streaming down Delany’s face and landing hotly on her skin.

“I can’t,” she finally managed. “I can’t do that. We’re going to get out of here.”

Slowly and deliberately the girl lifted up the weight of her head and let it fall back onto the ground with a thud. Then again. And again. Delany tried shoving her hands under the girl’s head but when she let go of the wrists her hands were once again pulling on anything she could grasp. Delany’s hands were covered in thick warm blood the minute she touched the girl’s head. She’d reopened some unknown wound beating her head against the ground.

“’lease …” the girl begged.

When she could take no more Delany felt around her body until she found a stone. She picked it up and held it over the girl. She couldn’t see the rock in her outstretched arms. Maybe that made it easier. Made it possible.

If only to make her be quiet, Delany heaved the stone down on the girl’s head. There was a sickening crunch of breaking teeth and squishing gray matter.

“K-k- …” the girl whispered.

She brought the rock down again, harder this time, putting her weight behind the swing. Something hot splashed onto her face and landed in her mouth. She bent over and hurled all over her own lap in a slimy mess.

“Some fucking days,” Delany muttered into the dark.

Chapter 2

Fluffy cinnamon foam stuck to the tip of Delany’s nose. Her friend Steven chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

He tapped his own nose and smiled, “You’ve got a little something.”

Delany touched her nose with the tip of her finger and rolled her eyes. “How long were you sitting on that?”  
 “Only a moment, ma chere,” he replied. His eyes glittered wickedly.

Her fingers were sticky from the sugary foam. She tested the viscosity, sticking her fingers together and pulling them apart.

Steven wasn’t the kind of person she ever really saw herself becoming friends with. He was selfish, high maintenance and his tongue was so sharp it could cut you if you weren’t careful. Steven had roguish dark hair and green eyes that matched everything he wore.

In the past Delany had perhaps been overly critical of queens. She’d watched them rip each other apart over the most mundane shit during her “drop-in” years of art school and she had no patience for petty personal drama. But people are individuals, she reminded herself, and when Steven sat next to her in Theater 404 she felt an instant connection. He had a slight southern drawl and a wicked sense of humor she had never seen in another human being.

And he kept her honest. He was her sharpest critic and her biggest cheerleader and he had inadvertently forced her to be her best self. He was always coming up with some harebrained business scheme trying to get rich ‘before his looks started to go’. They weren’t all winners but a few of them were. Two years ago he’d invented an IPhone app that allowed train conductors to clock in at various stations without having to stop the train and get out to complete a paper form. The details were enough to bore you to tears but Burlington Northern bought the thing for $100,000 and that was not too shabby in her book.

Delany rose sluggishly from her chair and approached the counter. She waived at a young man behind the counter spreading her sticky fingers.

“Uh … yeah?” he asked, shaking the mop of stringy black hair out of his eyes. His face flushed bright red as he met her eyes.

“Napkin?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah. Sure.” He wiped his hands on his apron absentmindedly.

He was staring.

“Where?” she asked.

“Oh,” he mumbled pointing to a short stack of white cocktail napkins just beyond the counter.

As she reached over she felt her shirt slide down. His eyes were hot on her cleavage.

Picking up a couple napkins she smiled, “First look’s free but another one will cost you five dollars,” she joked.

His face flushed red and he mumbled something under his breath. She hadn’t meant to embarrass him. Suddenly she felt bad. But why? It wasn’t her job to stand around and be a pair of breasts to ogle, but even she had once been a painfully awkward teenager with a face full of zits.

“Thanks,” she said trying to make eye contact. He was already half way out the front door with a bag of garbage.

“Making friends?” Steven asked.

“God no. Kid was so weird.”

“Weird how?

“Just like, staring at me.”

“If you’re fishing for a compliment here you are going to be out of luck, even if you are the princess of my heart.”

Delany pursed her lips bemusedly. “And you are the prince of mine.” She continued, “But it wasn’t like a ‘hey sexy’ stare it was like he was, I don’t know, afraid of me.”

“Men are often intimidated by beautiful women.”

“There’s that compliment I was fishing for.”

“Touché,” Steven smiled raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“Maybe I’m making too much of it,” she sighed resignedly. Maybe she was meant to be an object. When she was a little girl, she’d sat on her daddy’s knee and he’d told her she could be anything. She wanted to be a mermaid. That hadn’t exactly worked out but sex object was pretty close. She tossed the last of her bagel into her mouth.

“… can you go with me?” Steven finished. Delany had barely been listening.

She blinked twice.

“You weren’t listening,” he huffed.

“You’re absolutely right. I was trying to decide if it was too late to chase my childhood dream of becoming a mermaid. Can I go with you where?”

“I’ve got to go to the county records office and get a statement of excise tax paid.”

She gave her coffee a swirl. “What the fuck is that?”

“That, the fuck, is a document I need to produce before they’ll let me get the title to that trailer I bought.”

Her eyes widened and she punched his arm playfully, “I completely forgot! Congratulations! Of course I’ll go. What have I got going on? Just sluttin’ around letting my shirt gape open for teenagers. How long do you think we’ll be there?”

“Maybe an hour? Don’t bring your handgun or your pocket knife; you have to go through security at City Hall.”

She lilted her head to the side and made her eyes big, “But I can still bring my mace and flail right?”

“If you can get it through security, more power to you.”

They tossed their cups into the compost bin and their straws in the garbage and left the shop for the sweet breeze of spring.

It only took a few minutes for City Hall to steal the spring from their steps. As Delany stood in a line of the most hapless rejects in creation she felt sweat beading up and slipping down her back. Mercifully it absorbed into the top of her jeans before sliding down her butt crack.

A man in a security uniform was waving a metal detector around the arms and legs of the people passing through. Monotonously he droned “Please take everythin’ out your pockets before stepping up to the scanner. Place yo personal items in the bin and slide it through the scanner.”

Like at the airport, the bins slid down the line and into the x-ray machine. One person would step up to the scanner, be ushered through slowly, and then receive the old wand treatment. The line would creep forward.

“So tell me about the trailer.” She said finally, bored and uncomfortable.

“She’s a beaut,” Steven exhaled, “It’s double-wide but short so you’ve got a nice big living room on the end. Galley kitchen, that’s what needs the most work. Honestly I’m not sure how long it’s going to take me but hopefully no more than a month?”

“Is that a question?” Delany joked.

“Maybe two?”

“How are you going to re-do the kitchen? I thought everything in a mobile home just fell apart when you touched it.”

“Oh it does honey, it does. We’ll have to scrap everything that’s in there and start fresh from the studs.”

That could take some time. God knew how much. Two months seemed optimistic. Not only was Steven a novice in house flipping but he was cheap as hell. He was going to complete the whole project by himself and she knew that would mean painting for her. That was pretty much all she was good for.

“Hey maybe you can teach me some stuff and I can help you,” she offered.

“Yeah? Like what kind of stuff?”

“Well I don’t know what I don’t know. Anything. I could help with the kitchen.”

They shuffled ahead in line.

“Maybe. I looked at it the other day; it looks like all the cabinets that have to come down are just held on with staples anyway. You could probably help with the demo,” he shrugged “sure, why not? You’re hired.”

“Yippie!” she exclaimed. That was the easiest job she’d ever gotten. And already the most fulfilling.

Delany had a terrible time with work. There was something about voluntary servitude that just didn’t sit right with her. She’d always figured by the time it really mattered she’d be famous or something. No “something” had come along. Here she was, pushing 30 and barely employed as a temporary server for the busy spring and summer seasons on the waterfront. There was nothing she hated more than waiting tables and serving handsy tourists.

Steven went on, “I can only barely pay you.”

“As long as it’s American dollars I’ll take it.”

“You know what, I’ll do you one better. I’ll pay you in both American dollars and kisses.”

He leaned down to kiss her on top of the head.

She looked up into his big green eyes and purred “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

They crossed their hands at the wrist and shook both hands. That made it official.

A stout woman in a blue uniform belted, “Please take everything out of yo pockets and place them in the bin. Slide the bin through the scanner.”

The pair looked up stupidly.

The woman in uniform began again, “Take everything out of yo-“

The pair continued, “-pockets and place them in the bin. Slide the bin through the scanner.”

“So you got it? Get to it. I don’t got time for yo chit chat pretty people. Good, now slide the bin through the scanner and you have a pleasant visit to the City Hall and Records Retention Site.”

They waved and thanked her in unison before holding their arms out so another security guard could run them over with a metal detector wand; neither had any interesting body piercings so they were motioned through without further commotion.

The building was massive. It dripped with art glass from the massive complex chandeliers to dozens of hand-made sculptures on pedestals and behind glass. Light from the leaded windows bounced off the colored pieces and projected a rainbow down on the floor and the people below. The effect was mesmerizing.

After consulting a building map the two made their way to the auditor’s office.

“Knock knock!” Steven called out.

A heavy woman with short-chopped auburn hair looked over the top of her glasses.

“I need to get some paperwork for a mobile home I recently purchased?”

Nothing.

“Can you help me get a paper title?”

“You’ll have to go up to licensing for a paper title,” she croaked.

“I’m sorry, I mean I need to get the excise tax paid here, then I’ll get the paper title.”

“Title’s upstairs.”

“You are so right, but can you give me a hand with the excise tax?” he prodded.

“For what?”

Steven shut his eyes and opened them again slowly, “For a mobile home.”

“What year?”

“It’s a ’78.”

“Got the title?” she asked, returning her gaze to her crossword puzzle.

Steven and Delany exchanged glances and stepped up to her counter. He withdrew the old title from his pocket which the previous owner had signed off on.

“Bill of sale?”

He produced it. Delany tried to make a careful note of what was going on. For next time? She wasn’t sure.

She typed slowly using what Delany had heard called the “hunt and peck” method. It took forever.

Delany had a lot of nervous habits and at the moment she was biting her nails. Steven smacked her hip as he noticed with a sideways glance. She smacked him back.

The woman behind the counter shot them a sharp look. They both smiled sheepishly.

“Sorry,” Steven mumbled.

Delany giggled.

The woman rolled her eyes at the desk and continued what looked like punching the information from the title into the computer. She shuffled her papers and the pair struggled to be quiet. Patience had never been Delany’s virtue.

“Alright,” the woman finally said looking up, “it’ll be $488.79 for the excise tax.”

Delany’s eyes widened in horror. She looked at Steven who didn’t seem fazed in the slightest.

“Take a check?”

“Yeah. Make it out to King County.”

Once they’d made it out of the woman’s cramped office they made their way “upstairs” and retrieved the paper title, now made out with Steven Bale’s name on the front.

“Well you’re a homeowner. How does it feel?” Delany asked.

“I’d feel better if I could live in it.”

“What do you mean *if* you could live in it?”

“It’s in a 55 and over park. I had to sign paperwork yesterday saying I wouldn’t sleep there or anything while I’m fixing it up.”

“For crying out loud you can’t even sleep in it while you fix it up?” she snatched the fresh green title out of his hand. “It’s in Auburn?!” she asked frantically.

He smiled grimly, “Why do you think I need the help? If it was right around the corner or I could sleep in it I’d have it done myself in a couple weeks-“

Delany snorted.

“Ok a month, maybe. But it’s not, it’s far away and I can’t stay there and the neighbors are a bunch of nosey old fogies. So I need you- the princess of my heart- to help. I know it’s far but you can make the drive in an hour and I’ll be doing the driving so...”

She thought for a moment about the prospect of making that drive, even a handful of times. It wasn’t pretty. The traffic was always a mess, especially when she got off her early shift at the restaurant in the afternoons.

“Plus it’s not like you’re going on auditions right now,” Steven continued poking her in what was developing into a thriving love handle. She furrowed her eyebrows and sucked in her stomach.

“You sure know how to sweet talk a lady,” she grumbled.

“How about this,” he ventured taking out his checkbook, “how about I pay you $500 up front and another $500 every two weeks we work on the place. Would that sweeten the deal?”

She literally could not remember the last time she had $500. She hadn’t expected him to pay her that kind of money for the whole project. She tried to hide the excitement in her voice.

“That would sweeten the deal, yes.”

“Then will you help me?”

“I will. And I’ll try not to complain the whole time.”

“That’s all I could ever ask of you.”

Chapter 3

It had been at least two hours since Delany awoke in the dark. It had been an hour or more since she’d helped someone into the great beyond. She’d never killed anyone before. In retrospect, she had never even met anyone who’d killed someone before. That she knew of. She was worse than a murder amateur; she was a murder virgin, blindly stabbing away with her rock dick hoping for a happy ending. Except instead of feeling amazing, now she felt terrible.

It was different now that she was alone again. She no longer sensed movement around her. She didn’t hear any desperate breathing. It was quiet as a cemetery. The joke was not lost on her.

Now that she was awake and the adrenaline was coursing through her she figured it would be a good time to struggle for freedom. Her hands were tightly bound but she could still wiggle her fingers and move her palms when the wrists were pressed together. With her back against the damp rock wall she hunched over, tugging at the knots around her ankles. Blood was swimming down her fingertips and getting worked into the sticky parts of the rope. It was getting harder and harder to get a grip.

The joke was not lost on her.

She shook the hair out of her eyes and bent down as far as she could over her own knees.

There had been a time a while ago when she’d been determined to go to Antarctica. She remembered reading that when you are in a very cold climate you should move slowly, try not to get your body heat up too high. The last thing you wanted to do in the cold was sweat. You lost heat, your core temperature would plummet and by the time you knew you were in trouble hypothermia would be setting in and you’d be a long way from base camp.

It was cold in this dungeon. It was freezing cold. Sweat fell down her forehead and mixed with the blood on her hands. Delany couldn’t help but chuckle that her whole day was literally blood, sweat and tears. She took in a deep breath and tried to calm down. If she got hypothermic she was never going to get out of here. Wherever here was. She pushed her sweaty forehead against the dryer sleeve of her shirt. Squinting down at her feet, she tried to figure out how the rope was tied, figuring maybe she could start from the frayed end and work her way to the knot, untangling it like a mess of fine chains in the bottom of the jewelry box.

She was trying to push the end of the rope through a tight spot in the knot but to no avail. The ends were fraying in her fingertips as she bent her fingers strangely trying to maneuver it loose. Maybe there was a strategy in that? Maybe if she spent long enough she would be able to fray the ends completely and pull the tiny segments of rope through the knot.

Delany’s neck went limp and she hung her head. How long might that take? To separate the segments of the braided rope and then to try pulling them, individually, as her fingers cramped tighter and tighter in the cold and the rope became more and more sticky from blood and gunk.

She couldn’t help but wonder if the other woman had tried these things too, early on. Had she tried to free herself? Had she been hurt in the process or had something far more sinister happened to her while she was trapped in this hole? Closing her eyes, Delany decided not to think too much about whether those things were going to happen to her. Smart, pretty, strong girls don’t die alone in a hole, she reasoned. Someone would find her. Someone had to be looking for her. For a second she closed her eyes.

With a gasp Delany snapped back to consciousness. There was a crack as her skull slapped the stone wall behind her.

“This again,” she muttered. This time it took only a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. There were still a lot of things beyond her field of vision but for the first time she noticed she could see her individual fingers. She could tell that her jean shorts had a bluish hue; the blood in her hair had depth of color. Goody.

Something was different now, aside from her acclimatization to her strange surroundings, something had woken her up. Widening her eyes, she scanned the black surrounding her. There didn’t appear to be any movement.

Beep.

Not sure if she had heard it or imagined it, Delany closed her eyes in concentration.

Nothing. She held her breath.

Nothing. Another minute elapsed. Impatience grated her raw nerves. She began to hear all kinds of things. Somewhere, behind the rock she leaned against, the monolith was settling. In a scary movie once they talked about how inside mines it’s never silent because the rock is constantly shifting in imperceptible ways. Maybe it was in her head but she could hear a windy moaning behind the cold damp wall. And there was the ever-present dripping—she’d almost forgotten about it.

Beep.

“Motherfucker”, she whispered, there it was again. It was real and it was coming from somewhere. If she was going to find it she would have to get untied so she could move about the cabin, as it was. Intent on freeing herself now, and with renewed hope, she began scratching the damp rope around her wrists against the rock wall. Every once in a while it would catch a sharp edge and another tiny fragment would fray. It might take hours but it was the best option she had. Every so often the wall would sprinkle tiny chips and dirt like little shards of glass into her wounds. Even so, gritting her teeth she kept at it until she felt the first cord start to snap.

Excitedly she passed the ropes over the jagged stone surface faster and faster. She breathed in the dust that flew, coughing and choking. A few minutes later the last piece that mattered was cut and with the delicacy of a surgeon Delany drew her wrists apart. It stung but the adrenaline spike she experienced made up for the momentary pain.

Getting her feet loose took far less time. It was still a tedious task but she was high on success which made the time pass faster. Using a similar method, Delany sawed at the bindings on her ankles with the sharp edge of a rock.

A few times she caught her bare skin with the instrument and while it did cut into her, she didn’t think it was worth holding on to as a weapon. There were bigger rocks, she knew, if she needed to smash in a face.

Once the rope holding her legs together snapped it was as if she could breathe again. She slumped against the wall and stretched her legs out wide. Absentmindedly she wiped at the dirt and blood. The sweat that had pooled in the crotch of her shorts was cold, freshly exposed to the air. It was cold but the sensitive parts of her that had been close to rash status welcomed the breeze.

Beep.

With her eyes closed Delany smiled a wry smile.

“Five more minutes,” she whispered to the dark.

Roughly five minutes later she tested her weak legs to stand. It felt like glass was ripping her sore muscles to ribbons. She cried out at first attempt then gritted her teeth. There was still a lot she didn’t know about her circumstances and the last thing she needed was to draw attention to herself just as she was about to escape. Maybe escape. Probably.

Once she was up she tried to get her bearings in the space. She had crawled along the wall with her left hand to the rock when she’d moved away from the body. What remained of the girl was on her right now? It sounded like the beep was coming from somewhere in front of her and to the left.

How was she going to make her way? Did it matter? She had started to ascribe this particular spot on the wall with significance. It had become her spot. It was the place she’d crawled to when she needed to get away from what she’d done. It was the place where she had freed herself. Hell, there was a dip in the rock that she’d been leaning against that was slightly more comfortable for her back. Simply having stayed in this spot for the last hour had made it special to her. Suddenly Delany understood how hard change could be.

After a few minutes she decided the best way to search out the sound would be to remember where her safe spot was and move systematically from there. She kept her right hand on the rough wall and staggered slowly toward the place where the sound had originated. She hoped.

The overall shape of the wall felt like an arc. There was a concavity as she shuffled along. She remembered that scene in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade where Harrison Ford was running through the maze of traps trying to find the room with the Holy Grail and just as he made it safely past a bunch of whizzing arrows to what he thinks is safety he found himself teetering at the brink of a huge chasm.

One inch at a time was slow going. Her anxiety increased with each shuffling step. Tears welled up in her eyes and she wasn’t sure why she was so scared. After all the time she had spent tied up she’d thought the freedom of movement would make her feel better, not worse. Holding one hand against the wall and the other hand in front of her she tried to keep her eyes on her outstretched fingers. It felt like she was rounding a corner.

Delany’s knees buckled underneath her. Maybe it was dehydration or exhaustion or the adrenaline was finally starting to wear off. On her hands and knees she struggled to breathe.

“Is this a fucking panic attack?” she groaned aloud. She rolled her eyes. Her heart felt like it was trying to beat its way through her chest cavity. Her already poor vision became cloudy. Maybe she was just panicking about her temporary blindness. She’d done a blindfolded scavenger hunt once and, come to think of it, she had kinda freaked out about that too.

Her arms and legs were shaking and it was hard to get a breath. She decided the best thing to do would be to curl up and try not to die.

And then she heard it again, like a clear bell ringing in her ears. It was closer. Maybe not right in front of her face and she still wasn’t sure what she’d do if it turned out to be a goddamn smoke detector but it was closer than ever and she was freaking out but she was still alive. Baby steps. The mother of disappointment is expectation, she recited. She’d told herself the same thing a million times; usually she applied this philosophy to her relationships with men. Better to be prepared than surprised.

After a few minutes the shaking subsided. With renewed optimism she resumed crawling forward on her hands and knees. Every few feet she would close her eyes and listen for the sound. Finally she heard the beep again, this time almost directly to her right. She summoned her courage to leave the wall and pushed off with her finger tips like a swimmer launching from the end of the pool. Delany made every possible effort to stay straight.

*Straight but not narrow*, Steven teased in her head.

Paying careful attention to the ground in front of her she crept out into the middle of the room. She stared down at her fingers as they squished into the increasingly muddy dirt. As she crept farther the sound of water grew louder. It was more than the trickle she’d heard behind the rocks in her spot and she could almost detect where it was coming from. She could feel a cool breeze and it was coming from in front of her. It was the same direction as the beep. Progress.

In the course of her twenty-eight years Delany had spent little time underground but she was growing ever more certain that was where she was now. Although her knowledge of caves was weak she imagined that a cool breeze meant fresh air, maybe even a way out.

Then her hand brushed up against something foreign. It was no rock. It was cool but not cold. It was hard but not jagged. Reaching out with both hands she picked it up and held it close to her face. In the dimness she made out a dim red light so faint it was almost spent.

Turning it over in her hands she saw it had a stubby plastic antenna jutting out the top. Maybe it was a walkie talkie? She felt the surface for a speaker but didn’t feel the telltale waffle pattern. The antenna-thing was broken and a spring stuck out the side where it was taped with smooth electrical tape.

Beep.

It was like taking something out of the freezer after way too long. Could be meat, could be cake. She shrugged. She flipped it again and slowly, like a blind person, she moved her fingers over the object. Feeling around the edges she noticed a small round indentation. A button. Before she had time to decide if she would push it or exercise restraint her trembling finger depressed the button. Nothing happened.

She pushed it again.

The face of the object lit up with a set of bright red digital numbers. It flashed 03:00. 03:00:00, 03:00:00. Delany stared at it, dazzled by the light like a moth trapped in a lampshade.

And then it flashed a fourth time. 02:59:59.

Delany froze.

Chapter 4

It was early afternoon when Steven and Delany broke for lunch. They had been priming since nine in the morning and the sun was now high in the sky.

“I thought you said we’d be able to bust this out in a couple hours. We’re not even close.”

He narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice, “Delany, I need to tell you something.” He paused for affect, “I barely know anything about anything.”

The pair cracked up.

“Well here’s what I do know,” he continued, “paint fumes don’t get you high like they used to.”

She nodded in agreement. Looking around she found nowhere to sit so she flopped herself onto the floor. Steven pulled something from his messenger bag and joined her on the shabby rust colored shag carpet.

Digging her fingers into the shag Delany asked, “This is going too, right?”

“Oh yeah,” he assured her, “just as soon as I find some scrap big enough.”

“Scrap?” she asked.

“Yeah, lots of big construction sites end up with a ton of scrap carpet. They donate it or sell it back to the distributer they got it from. This whole place is only a thousand square feet and none of the rooms are very big so I’m thinking I can find scrap carpet at a good price.” He shrugged.

“Steven Bales, is it possible you are a genius?”

“Yes ma’am it certainly is.” He tossed a plastic sandwich baggie into her lap.

Her eyes widened. She dug her arm into her huge, tasseled, brown leather hobo bag in search of a pipe. It had been so long since she had money for weed she wasn’t even sure she was still carrying anything to smoke out of. She eyeballed a half empty soda can.

After a few of the longest seconds of Delany’s life she finally felt what she was looking for- a small glass pipe with a red glass glob that looked like a ladybug. There was a jagged chip out of the side that left it rarely used but she was happy to see it. She’d once called it Sheila.

While Delany was not a lady in the traditional sense of the word, she was well-versed in weed etiquette. She filled the little pipe and handed it to Steven.

“Greens,” she offered.

Half an hour later they were as yet unmoved from their positions on the floor. The smell was not improved but it was different and in her hazy state she thought of that as progress. She lay with her hair spread around her on the carpet like a mermaid floating in the sea, waving her hands above her and watching the smoke swirl around her as it mixed with the dust of the trailer.

Moments later there was a loud knock on the front door. The blood in her veins froze instantly. She rolled onto her stomach furiously swiping at the air to diffuse the smoke. She leaped to her feet in the process tearing a small section of carpet away from the wall.

“Oh shit,” she gasped, “The jig is up!”

“Just be cool,” Steven assured her as he sprang to his feet. He noticed the smoke billowing out the open living room window and slammed it shut. “Nothing to see here.”

He gave the room a quick once-over, straightened his shirt, grasped the handle and swung open the door.

On the other side of the screen stood the littlest, oldest man he had ever seen in real life.

“Smells like ganja!” she old man chirped.

Steven’s eyes widened and he tried to swallow. He decided to take the high road and deny, deny, deny.

“Hello Sir,” he began, “I’m sorry. Betty doesn’t live here anymore.”

“Don’t I know it,” he replied, “I saw ‘em wheelin’ her into the black Cadillac when she kicked the bucket in February. Hideous woman,” he said shaking his head.

Delany struggled to contain her laughter.

“Woah now,” the old man remarked, “got yourself a hooker! Well I don’t want to intrude.”

“Oh, no Sir, I’m not a hooker,” she spoke up.

There was an unmistakable gleam in the old man’s eyes. His white beard almost covered the blueish orbs when he squinted laughing.

“I’m just teasin’ girly. I’m from number 18 up at the front. I was here when Betty wheeled her fat ass into this park and I made a point of being here when she moved on to hotter real estate, if you catch my drift. Sentiment ya see?”

Delany smiled although she wasn’t sure if it was funny. There was something fun about morbid old people so she decided to go with it. She stuck her hand out, “I’m Delany. And this is Steven. He just bought this place.”

“Well hello Devany, hello Steven. Nice to meet you both. I’m Arthur. You can call me Art, everybody does. It’s a pleasure to meet you miss, such a pretty girl. You,” he said pointing to Steven, “not so much.”

They all laughed.

Art continued, “So hey now, you gonna split some of that weed with an old man? I hear you kids get better stuff than we did in my day.”

Her eyes wide, Delany shrugged.

Steven began, “Arthur … I uh …”

“Just pullin’ your leg kid.” He winked, “I get the medical stuff for my glaucoma. And it’s cheaper. You gotta tell your doctor your glaucoma is killin’ you if you wanna get the good stuff.”

She sighed with relief, “I don’t know if the doctor will believe I have glaucoma Arthur.”

“Art. Call me Art,” he insisted.

“Art. OK. I can handle that.”

“Me too.” Steven agreed. “I’d ask you to come in but we don’t have any furniture or anything. We’ve only just started fixing it up.”

Art waved a hand dismissively, “I’ll come by to see how it’s coming along in a couple weeks. I’ve got a brother down in California who might want to come up here so I’m always keeping a look out for a good unit for him. ‘Course he’ll trash it but it’s easier to stomach when it’s your mess isn’t it?”

“That’s true,” Steven agreed, “this is only disgusting because it’s not our hair and skin cells we’re wading through.”

Art rubbed his own bald head, “Well, I don’t worry too much about the hair.”

They laughed like old friends.

“But it’ll be real nice when we’re done. I’m pretty much planning on gutting the whole thing and replacing everything from the studs out. New carpet, laminate in the kitchen, all new everything.” Steven reached into his wallet and withdrew a business card. “Here neighbor, keep my number handy and if you like how it turns out we can have your brother take a look at it sometime.”

Arthur examined the card. “Bales. Bales. Where do I know that name from?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got family all over the place. I think there’s a college football star at one of the military colleges named Bales too.”

“Must be it. I think I went to school with a couple Bales’ down in California in the fifties. You wouldn’t know anything about that though,” he laughed.

“No Sir, I wouldn’t,” Steven replied.

“Do you have a business card miss?” Arthur asked, turning his attention to Delany and resting his eyes on her legs for a moment longer than was probably appropriate.

She felt a warm blush color her cheeks, “No no, I’m just a laborer.”

“Barely,” Steven mumbled.

She shot a fist out and punched him in the arm.

“Oh my god- Ow,” he grumbled.

Nodding his chin up and down like a bobble-head the old man said, “I’ll leave you kids to it then. Looks like you have a lot a lot of work ahead of you.” Just before he stepped off the carpeted porch he paused to say, “Hey I don’t mind about the smoking either but there are a lot of old fogies in this park. Ya dig?”

“It was stupid,” Delany blurted out.

“Just keep the windows closed and you should be okay.” He winked and flashed a sly smile.

“Thanks for the advice Art. We’ll have you over again next week to see how it’s coming along if that sounds good to you?” Steven suggested.

“Sounds great. You kids be good.”

“Good as we can!” Delany called after him.

Steven turned to her with arched eyebrows and a big smile and said, “Shit girl, I think we’re making friends.”

Delany nodded in agreement. “You know, this job is the cushiest I’ve ever had.”

“That’s because you’re slacking. Come on, we should get the carpet ripped up before we go home today.”

They retreated into the dim trailer and dust after making extra careful sure to close all the windows.

Chapter 5

Delany had been dreaming about being chased down a long tree-lined street at night when her phone buzzed on the side table next to her bed. She woke with a gasp. At first she wasn’t sure where she was. Panting for breath she reached for her phone.

“Hello?” she croaked. She closed her eyes again and slumped back into the covers. It had been a long night and it was already shaping up to be a long morning.

“Rise and shine sweet cheeks!”

“Five more minutes,” she plead into the receiver.

“No more minutes. We’re already late,” Steven said.

“How can we be late? It’s Saturday.”

“Delaney, it is 10 am!”

That got her attention. They were supposed to meet at 9 outside. She had royally fucked up.

*Shocker*

“I am so sorry,” she said breathlessly, “I’m getting up. I’m getting dressed right now. I can be there in … um …” she checked her phone for the time which read 10:08 am, “Maybe half an hour? God I’m so sorry. This is why I can’t have nice things!”

She ripped off the oversized tee-shirt she slept in and marched toward the bathroom. She grabbed her toothbrush and looked for the familiar tube of Crest. No luck.

Steven, ever reassuring, said “It’s fine. Really. Just get dressed.”

She tossed the drawers under her sink and found no toothpaste. Exasperated, she dunked the toothbrush into her jug of off-brand mouthwash and stuck it back into her mouth.

“I’ll just put on some clothes and meet you there. Don’t touch a thing until I get there! I’ll work triple fast-“ but before she could finish there was a loud knock at the door. “Shit,” she muttered, genuinely freaked out. No one ever visited her at home. Almost no one ever knew where she lived. “Hey that’s someone at my door right now. Stay on the line with me in case it’s murderers.”

Grabbing up a pair of yoga pants she headed for the door from her small bedroom. Passing through the living room she saw a flash of black scurry behind the couch.

“Bagheera don’t be a dick right now. Mommy has guests.” A stream of frothy mouthwash foam shot out of her mouth and landed on the sofa. The cat retreated further into the dark corner of the room.

Jamming her legs into the stretchy pants she pulled them up over her ass just as she arrived at the door. With her toothbrush still hanging out the side of her mouth she opened the door.

Like a beacon of healing light Steven stood there, the sun gleaming off his rapidly developing bald spot. He held a steaming cup from the Jewel café in one hand and an unnaturally bright flower in the other.

“You- are an angel,” she stuttered wrapping both hands around the cardboard cup, “What’s that?” she asked, pointing to the flower. It was blue.

He stepped in from the porch. “You look like hell. Drink.”

She took a sip to find it was a dirty chai. “Ah, nectar of the gods. What kind of flower is that?”

He set it down on the counter.

“I don’t know.”

“Where did you get it?”

“I didn’t. It was sitting in front of your door.”

She stopped. “What?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was propped up on your door.”

“No note?”

“Nope. Unless it blew away. But I didn’t see anything.”

In the utmost ladylike fashion she spat her used mouthwash into her kitchen sink. Grabbing a hand towel she wiped the residue from her mouth. She shrugged and turned the flower over in her hands.

Steven reached into his jean’s pocket a pulled out a tube of lavender mint lip balm commenting, “It’s a wonder no one has married you yet. I can only imagine the joy on their faces waking up to this every morning.”

“Hey I don’t bust out the sweatpants and spit on the first date or anything.”

“So who do you think the flower is from?” Steven asked with a dishy tone.

“Honestly,” Delany said thinking, “I don’t have any idea. I haven’t even gone on a date in weeks. The last person I went out with was this awkward software developer who wanted to order my wine for me.”

“So it wasn’t meant to be?”

She shook her head, “No. It certainly was not. Who cares if I drink cheap wine? I like cheap wine.”

“You’re cheap!”

“I am!” she agreed, “Cheap and easy both.”

“Maybe it’s not supposed to be for you. Do you have any more loveable neighbors?”

She thought about it seriously. There was Mrs. Gingerch who was perhaps 95 years old and wheelchair bound. Didn’t mean she couldn’t have an admirer though. She was feisty for her age and often fed Bagheera when Delany was out of town. Not for too long of course, in case she died, but for a couple days at a time Mrs. Gingerch was a very reliable sitter. The cat hated everyone but looked at the old woman with less disdain than anyone else Delany knew. It was a match made in heaven. But it wasn’t likely that she’d left the flower for the cat the girl or anyone else.

“I haven’t seen any eligible ladies lately but there could be one up a floor. Or down. Right apartment number wrong floor?” she ventured.

“It’s more likely than someone coming over here with a crazy blue flower for you but not leaving a note. Plus, not to be the rudest bitch, but you have been wearing those sweatpants non-stop. No one falls in love with a girl in sweatpants,” Steven pointed out.

“Hey, I wear regular pants sometimes,” she shot back.

“What, to work?”

“Yes. Sometimes to work. Tight little slacks that make my ass look amazing.”

“Well that’s a start, you do interact with the public. One of these days you might bring fish n’chips to someone who wants to take you away from all this.”

“Maybe I already did!” she said, suddenly struck by the idea that she might indeed have a secret admirer.

“Was there anyone at work the last couple weeks who maybe, asked your name? Followed you home?” Steven wondered out loud.

Delany thought it over. Last week the only memorable customer interaction she’d had was a loud fight with a middle-aged man who insisted she steam his milk and then pour it over ice. She’d apologized and let him know they weren’t able to do that due to health code. He insisted she’d done it for him a week ago. She assured him she had not. And wouldn’t. Yes it was a stupid rule but it was stupid rules that kept a roof over her head and bacterial infections out of his guts. By the end of it the man had knocked a case of napkins on the ground and stormed off without a drink. Delany had been left standing there, shaking mad, to clean it up.

Squinting her eyes and pursing her lips thoughtfully she decided “You know I don’t think I’ve dazzled anyone recently …”

Steven wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head saying, “I’m sure you dazzle all sorts of people. Maybe just not first thing in the morning. OK. Are you about ready to hit the road?”

She walked over to her counter and poured the last few dregs of beer out of a pilsner bottle and rinsed it out under the faucet. She stuck the flower in and set it in the table. It was festive. She plunked a handful of cat food in Bagheera’s dish and left her toothbrush on the kitchen counter. She slipped on a pair of shoes and socks.

Five minutes later they were out the door and Steven was nursing a long crimson scratch on the back of his hand.

“You should have that cat put down,” he hissed.

Delany laughed out loud. “It’s just you he hates,” she said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

“It’s not just me! He’s evil. He’ll smother you in your sleep someday.”

“I guess that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Once they’d made it to the trailer it was pushing noon and it was getting warm out. The spring had been mild so far this year. They’d had more sunny days than normal and the blossoms were already falling from the trees even though it was only March. They trailed down the street in pink and white rivers.

The park was quiet when they pulled in. Steven’s small Chevy S-10 made a noise like an asthmatic sewing machine as it putted into the driveway. Delany squinted against the sunshine and swung her long legs out of the door of the truck.

As she reached into the bed of the pickup to grab an orange 5 gallon Home Depot bucket a small blue sedan screeched into the park. A lanky black woman of about 30 emerged from the car. She slammed the door closed and marched toward the trailer next door. She was well dressed and steaming mad.

Steven and Delany exchanged a look like, *glad she’s not here for us.*

A moment later she emerged from the house dragging a boy of about eight behind her toward the car. He dug his heels into the ground in a vain attempt to stop their forward motion. No luck. It was hard to make out exactly what he was saying but it sounded like, “Maa, no! Ma, don’t! Why come you gotta do dis, yeah?”

Understandably, Seattle and the surrounding area has a large Hawaiian population and a lot of two-state residents who travel back and forth between the islands and the mainland seasonally.

A pair of elderly people shuffled out onto the porch of the nearby trailer. The old woman said, “Come on Keola, he not dat bad.”

“No no,” the woman insisted pulling the boy by the arm, “If you gotta call me ‘cause he so bad den he gotta go home.”

“He not dat bad- he a little bad” the old woman went on before the old man cut in-

“Only ‘cause dis one a boy. Da boys is always a little bad.”

The woman stopped abruptly. With a perfectly straight face the woman looked down into the boy’s big round eyes and said, “OK. Go give grama an granpa a kiss on da check. You neva see them again.”

“Moooooommmmm,” the boy complained in a high-pitched scream.

“No listen, I not mad. You wanna be bad all day das okay only you gotta do it at home with me. Say goodbye.” She turned to make a show of waving goodbye, “Goo’bye grama. Say goo’bye granpa. Goodbye forever.” She waved the boys limp arm from side to side.

Delany was laughing so hard tears began to stream down her cheeks. Steven elbowed her in the ribs playfully but it was too late. The boy had locked on the pair and in a flash he had broken free from his mother and was running full-speed at number 83.

It only took a moment for the child to make it across the driveway, up the porch stairs making a B-line for the living room. He burst through the screen door like a cannonball.

The child’s mother clapped her hands over her mouth in shock. The grandparents began shuffling across the driveway, their flip flops making a funny thwacking noise against the pavement. Flop flop flop flop.

“Keola, look what you done. Milo breaka der house!” the old woman admonished.

Steven and Delany exchanged a quick look and then said in unison, “It’s okay, it’s not a house.”

The old woman took Delany’s hand in both of hers and made profuse apologies. Her daughter looked horrified. As she stomped across the driveway her eyes narrowed at the doorway and the boy inside.

“You are gonna be in a world of trouble Milo boy,” his mother warned.

A small voice piped up from inside the trailer, “I don’ care! I wanna stay with nana and papa!”

There was an unmistakable ‘awe’ from the elderly pair. The old woman, nana, patted Delany’s hand. “You hear dat? He love his tutu yeah?”

“Yeah,” Delany agreed.

“Yeah,” the old man parroted back with a smile.

Keola ran a worried hand through her hair which hung in long tight braids. “Milo you get out here right now buddy, you know I’m not playin’ wich you.”

The pudgy little boy stuck his head through the broken screen, “I wanna stay with grama an granpa.”

“Hey Ma,” Keola said, “Tell me again, was it that little boy who was throwing rocks at the trailer park cat today?”

The old woman nodded her head solemnly, “Oh yeah, dat was dis boy.”

The old man said, “It’s da mobile home estates cat Keola.”

“I don care you wanna call it da trailer park, da mobile estates, the Taj Mahal, yeah? Milo been throwin’ rocks like a hooligan and mama cannot get him to stop so I gotta come get him and take him home. An beat him.”

The boy’s eyes got very wide and Delany became uncomfortable in the middle of the conversation.

“Noooooooo…”

Keola marched up the steps of the porch and reached a thin arm covered with gold bangles through the rip in the screen. She came back out with the boy by the ear although he did not seem to be in pain.

“Apologize to dese nice people for breakin’ der house. We gotta go back to mama’s work an’ you can file.”

“I’m sorry,” he whimpered.

Steven thought it best to lighten the mood and squatted down to the boy’s level. He said, “You know, it’s a lucky thing you broke through that screen because we were going to take it down today.”

“You were?”

“Yes we were. We’ve actually got a lot of stuff that needs to be torn down.”

“You do?”

“Oh yeah. Lots of stuff. I know your mom has to get back to work but maybe you could stay after all and you could help us work. What do you think mom?” Steven looked at Keola with his big green eyes and she pursed her lips into a tight line.

“Oh yeah? You got a lotta work to do today?” she asked.

Delany jumped at the chance to get the kid out of trouble. Her dad had been a hitter and she was pretty sure that was the root cause of her issues as an adult. Or teenage drug use. Hard to say for sure.

She said, “Yeah we have a lot of work. Got carpets to pull up in the back room and we need to pull up the linoleum in the kitchen too. Plus, we have to take that screen down, like my friend here said. We really could use the extra hands and maybe your folks wouldn’t have to keep an eye on him for a few hours?”

Keola tossed her braids over her shoulder and asked her mother, “Mama, you think you can bringa him home tonight if these two keep him outta trouble for a while?”

The older woman squeezed Delany’s shoulders and smiled. “Oh yeah, I can bring him back lata tonight. What time you wanna kaukau?”

“Maybe seven, yeah? OK. OK. Milo, come ‘ere. You gonna say ‘Thank you’ to dis nice man and nice girl who wanna save your butt a whoopin’.”

Milo took the most direct route and stepped back through the torn screen and down the stairs. The grin on his chubby little face was priceless. He made a little bow and said “Mahalo nice man, mahalo nice lady. I promise to work very hard.”

“Aw…” Steven and Delany said in unison.

“We’ll send him back across the street before it gets dark,” Steven said.

“No problem, just send him home hungry yeah? We gotta lotta food tonight,” said the old man.

The boy closed his eyes and made a fish face by puckering his lips. His mother obliged by bringing her face low enough for him to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“OK,” she said, “you be good. I mean it. I send you back to Hawaii and make you work on da pineapple farm.”

She strode back to her car without another word and presumably, went back to work. Steven and Delany spent a few minutes in the driveway talking to the elderly couple about the project going on at number 83 before they headed back to their own trailer.

Steven took a large wooden mallet from the truck-bed and handed it to Milo.

“Here buddy, you know how to use one of these?”

The boy nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Good, good. Why don’t you head inside and see if you can put some holes in the walls in the kitchen? Can you do that?”

By the time the day was spent Milo, Steven and Delany had become fast friends. Milo proved himself to be a great help with demo. Just before he headed back across the driveway Steven pulled 5$ from his pocket and handed it to the boy.

“There’s another five in it for you if you see us working again and want to come help, ok?”

He smiled and ran across the street with his money in hand making a tell-tale *flip-flap flip-flap* sound as he went.

Delany mused, “You can’t beat labor that cheap.”

“I know, I might not need you at all,” Steven teased.

She punched him in the arm.