

Dreaming of Deliverance Excerpt: Chapters 1-3

by R.E. Chambliss (© 2009)

Five years ago when Lindsay Paulson, a naive college student and talented distance runner, was 18, she was convicted of drug smuggling. Now, halfway through a 10-year prison sentence, she begins having what seem to be dreams, in which she leaves her cell in the night and visits another reality called Trae. Dreaming of Deliverance tells of Lindsay's experiences both in Trae, where she finds herself among people enslaved by terrifying creatures, and in prison where she tries to make sense of what's happening in her sleep: Is she actually escaping from prison somehow or is she losing her mind?

Chapter 1: CWCF

"Lindsay, we're gonna be famous."

I'd just finished a 10-mile run to nowhere on the battered C Yard treadmill and was sitting on the bed taking off my Nikes and trying to imagine I was somewhere else. Lorrinda's brown feet dangled from the top bunk—frosted, peach toenails gleaming in the glow of the fluorescent lights as she swung her legs back and forth.

"But I can't decide if I should write to Oprah again or maybe Fox. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure I want to be famous," I said, and waited for the inevitable explosion.

"What do you mean?" She jumped down with a thump and glared at me.

"Everyone wants to be famous. Haven't you seen *Survivor*? Why would anyone go on TV and eat bugs and shit if they didn't want to be famous?"

"No idea," I replied. "But it doesn't matter what I want, anyway. No one's going to watch a reality show set here, even if by some miracle the cops let cameras in. Too boring and way too depressing."

My back always ached from sitting hunched over in the cramped space between the bunks, and I was dying to get up and stretch, but I knew from experience it was dangerous to get in Lo's way once she started pacing and pontificating, so I curled my feet up under myself and waited.

"I can't believe my fuckin' ears! Of course people would want to watch us. You got that sweet little white girl thing going for you, and nobody's finer than me! Two ladies like us, wrongfully incarcerated, forced to deal with the indignities of this shitty place..."

"Profanity is a mark of the ignorant!" Sheila shouted from her bunk across the room.

"Aw, shut the fuck up, Sheila!" Lorrinda bellowed back. "You're one of the prime reasons *why* it's so shitty here."

The cheers, whoops, and laughter of the other women in our room bounced off the dingy, puke-green walls. Everyone loved it when Sheila was put in her place. We were sick of people talking down to us and had no patience for her holier-than-thou attitude.

Besides, Shelia *was* full of shit. Lorrinda was the least ignorant person I knew at the California Women's Correctional Facility—CWCF. Maybe she wasn't college

educated like Margaret and hadn't lived in as many places as Sheila, but Lorrinda was wise to the ways of the world. She knew everything about the people we lived with in C Yard. Not only the details of their lives—who had kids, who was gay, who'd last had sex (and whether or not they'd faked it)—but also what made them tick, who could be trusted and who was likely to rat you out to one of the guards if they had a chance. If C Yard had a leader, it was Lorrinda, and although back then I didn't believe I had enough blessings to count on one hand, I was thankful Lorrinda was my friend.

"This would be the ultimate place for a reality show," she continued, as if Sheila hadn't interrupted. "Who wouldn't want to watch us and how we live? To learn our stories and why we're here? I'm definitely writing Oprah again. When I hear back and the camera crews show up, you'll change your mind about fame."

"I doubt it."

"Fame makes all the difference for people like us, especially in here. You'll want a piece of it. If nothing else, it might get you some mail!"

I didn't say anything. I really didn't want to argue such a moot point. There was no way in hell Oprah would write back. We weren't interesting; we were pathetic. Reality shows are all about people competing for a million dollars, or humiliating themselves looking for love in elaborate but phony situations. No one wants to watch sad women who've made huge mistakes and have no hope.

"Yeah, mail would be nice." I sighed and stretched back out on the bunk. "But for now, I guess I'll have to settle for reading yours."

Lorrinda strategized all afternoon; I counted the hours until lights-out and alternated between staring at the bottom of her bunk and staring at the pages of a worn paperback I'd already read five times. Time, which trudged along under the best of circumstances, almost came to a dead stop the last few hours until night and relative peace. After five years here, I still wasn't used to the complete lack of privacy. Everything happened in the company of a dozen other people. Showering, getting dressed, taking a dump, changing a tampon—nothing was sacred and everything was open to the dissection and gossip of the yard or the cold scrutiny of the guards. Even on those rare occasions when you were alone in your room, you couldn't truly relax because you knew that a guard or one of your eleven roommates could come in on you at any time. I didn't like the fact that everything I did was on display. After lights-out things were quieter and we at least had the cover of darkness. I could pretend I was alone. It was the only time I'd let myself cry.

At the beginning of my sentence, I'd felt differently; the nights terrified me. All I knew about prison came from movies such as Tom Selleck's *An Innocent Man* or "don't drop the soap" sitcom jokes. That first night, I didn't know if I was going to get stabbed with a shiv or sexually propositioned, but neither option held any appeal whatsoever. As time went on, though, I realized I didn't need to worry so much. Since I'm small physically and by nature reserved, I quickly learned not to react when challenged, to be so quiet and innocuous as to be essentially invisible. The downside to that strategy was that it made me too withdrawn to get close to other people. With the notable exception of Lorrinda, I kept to myself. But staying remote and detached made it possible for me

to survive at CWCF. Now I didn't need to force myself to stay blank and indifferent in stressful situations—it was an automatic reaction.

Besides, most of my fellow inmates weren't dangerous criminals. Like me, the majority of the women in CWCF were in on a drug charge. There were some for theft, or accessory to a more serious crime, but the only violent convictions I knew about had been for a couple of women who'd killed their abusive husbands or boyfriends, and those who were mentally ill. The crazies could be scary, but the tougher women, like Lorrinda or Monique, usually shut down their outbursts pretty quickly.

And CWCF was actually an improvement over the Los Angeles County Jail where I'd been locked up after my arrest. There, we couldn't wear makeup or our own clothes and we didn't have gym equipment or jobs to distract us. Here, at least, there were a few freedoms.

As my sentence went on, I began to treasure the nights at CWCF. Even if I wasn't truly alone, in the dark I didn't have to look at anyone else and if I was lucky enough to have some batteries with juice, I could listen to music through my ancient Walkman's headphones and not have to hear anyone either. It was possible to pretend I was somewhere else for at least a little while.

Eventually, the last bell clanged. Lorrinda gathered her magazines and papers together and stuck them in her locker. Our bed whined and shivered as she climbed up to her bunk and settled in for the night.

"You'll help me finish those letters in the morning? I'll have one for my kids too."

"Yeah."

"Thanks, Linds. 'Night."

Chapter 2: First Time

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was the cold. My toes were dead with it, and the soles of my feet stiff and frozen. My cheek felt as if it were being pressed into a pile of small, jagged pieces of ice. I wanted to stretch out and pull the blanket up over my shoulders, but I couldn't get my muscles to work.

The power has gone out, I thought, reaching for an explanation that made sense. *The power is out and the heat is out and the back-up generators must be down. Maybe I'm getting hypothermia and that's why I can't move.* I wondered how my roommates were coping. Sheila, in particular, hated the cold and often refused to go outside when it was under 60. How was she handling this chilling numbness?

I eased my eyes open. Nothing. I couldn't see anything.

Okay that would make sense if it is still the middle of the night and the electricity is out, I reasoned. *Don't panic, Lindsay.* Then the bottom dropped out of my stomach as I realized I couldn't *hear* anything either. Noise and prison go hand in hand. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been surrounded by silence.

Was I sick? In a coma? I could feel my heart contracting—each beat squeezing painfully, deep in my chest as I tried to fight off panic. Even at my lowest point in the early days at CWCF, I could trust my senses. But now I couldn't move, see, or hear. What had happened? I took a few deep breaths and willed myself to calm down. There had to be an explanation. As always during times of stress, I pictured Kenya, where I'd spent one summer as a teenager with my parents—the heat, the veldt grass dotted with

sprawling, flat-topped acacia trees, herds of antelope grazing. Gradually the pounding in my chest diminished and once I could think clearly, I realized the situation might not be as bad as I'd originally thought.

For one thing, I wasn't paralyzed. Instead, I lay on my side, wedged into a tight fetal position, and it was possible to move very slightly, maybe an inch in each direction before I bumped into what felt like solid rock. When I tried to raise my head, my nose brushed against something round, hard, and prickly. With a small shock I realized I was lying curled into such a compact ball that my nose touched my stubbly knee.

Also, it wasn't completely dark. If I rolled my eyes down as far as they could go, I could make out a faint triangle of gray light. My eye muscles ached with strain as I studied it, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me. No. The light was there. I just couldn't move my head far enough to see it clearly.

Then I began to hear some muffled sounds—the vague hiss of running water and little random squeaks like the staccato squeals of children at a playground. Both the light and the noise, however faint, reassured me. If I could hear and see, perhaps there was a way out.

One body part at a time, I tested the limits of the tiny space in which I found myself. The surrounding rock held firm. I did my best not to lose hope but the more I struggled in vain to break free, the more desperate I became. Still there was nothing to do but continue my methodical squirming, and by the time I'd tried everything but my feet, I was sweating and grunting with the effort of forcing my cramped muscles against solid, unyielding stone.

At first it seemed that my feet weren't going to be able to make much more progress than the rest of my body. I stretched and strained my foot muscles in all directions, but there was no give in the rock that surrounded them. Then the arch of my right foot cramped in an excruciating spasm. Frantic for relief, I flexed it as hard as I could and with an audible crunch, my heel broke free of the rock. I wiggled it back and forth, widening the hole in the rock, which splintered like brittle shale, until I could move my whole foot freely. Another crunch and my left foot came loose as well.

Eventually, I was able to push both feet upward and outward in a reverse squat, straightening my legs in a burst of broken rock and sand. I slithered backwards through the hole, and bracing my hands against the space where my torso had been pinned, slid completely out.

I lay for several minutes on the ground coughing violently to clear my lungs of dust while my muscles jerked and twitched. My whole body was numb and prickly, like a foot that has gone to sleep after sitting crossed-legged too long. The pins-and-needles sensation was agonizing, but didn't overshadow my relief at being out in the open air.

After a while, the muscle spasms began to slow and I could think about my new surroundings. My eyes were stuck shut by grit and tears, but from behind the closed lids, I saw dim light. The sounds I'd heard a few minutes ago were now more distinct. There *was* running water nearby—quite a large river or maybe even a waterfall. But what I'd thought were children, were actually birds chirping and chattering to each other. There must have been hundreds of them, but I didn't know what type. Thanks to my parents, I knew how to identify many different kinds of birds by listening to their calls. At the very least, I could usually tell which family of bird I was hearing—whether wrens or

flycatchers. But none of these sounded the slightest bit familiar. *Maybe if I could get a look at them.* I decided the time had come to open my eyes.

One thing was certain, I was nowhere near CWCF. Instead of the dry, smoggy heat and yellow grasslands characteristic of the San Joaquin Valley in July, a cool, gray fog hung damp in the air, so thick that it was difficult to see more than 50 yards in any direction. I sat on a carpet of soft green grass halfway up an enormous hill covered with long narrow mounds that lay across the slope. They reminded me of moguls on a ski run in that there was a pattern to their placement; they weren't perfectly spaced, but were regular enough not to look natural.

Several large, speckled boulders thrust upward from the bumpy terrain, their rough, hard surfaces in direct contrast with the furry turf of the hillside. The light was dim but I could still make out the birds, small and black with bright red bills and feet, as they hopped from rock to grass looking for food. For a moment I watched them, trying to determine if they were territorial, when all of a sudden my panic returned full force.

Where the hell was I?

I turned and looked behind me. A pile of sand and broken rock spilled from a small, dark opening in the side of the nearest mogul—my mogul, I supposed. Swallowing my terror at the memory of what it had been like to be stuck inside, I reached in trying to get some clue as to how I'd come to be trapped there, but felt nothing except for the cool, sandy sides of the hole.

I was sitting back on my haunches, rubbing at the grit on my palms and trying to work up the courage to actually stick my head back in the hole when an unearthly roar, almost like a jet plane taking off, shattered the silence. I jumped to my feet, slapped my

hands over my ears, and jerked around, but saw only grass, boulders, and fog—no obvious cause for the din. Despite the protection of my hands, my eardrums throbbed with pain, and vibrated so violently I was afraid they might burst.

The birds didn't like it any more than I did. They streamed away in all directions—clouds of small, black, fluttering shapes tumbling out of sight. Their obvious agitation terrified me, and without stopping to consider where I was going, I darted across the bumpy slope as fast as I could toward the nearest cluster of boulders.

Once I reached the other side of the rock outcropping, the noise lessened slightly. It was still loud enough that I wanted my hands over my ears, but wasn't painful anymore. The sky had darkened since my arrival, and it looked like it would soon be night. Fortunately, the noise was continuing to fade, but my fear remained. I couldn't see anything past the boulder, or hear anything except for the roar's reverberation in my head, but all of a sudden I had the unnerving sense that something was creeping up the slope. A strange odor marred the air, faint, but also sour and putrid. Adrenaline swept through me, along with a strange certainty: Someone was coming closer—someone I knew I didn't want to meet. I rested my head against the rough surface of the rock, hoping I was out of sight and trying not to throw up.

After the nausea had passed somewhat, I peeked around the boulder. A figure walked purposefully up the hill, lurching across the moguls. It looked like a man, tall and thin, wearing some kind of loose, baggy clothing. Like a giant paper doll cut out of black paper, he was flat and almost two-dimensional in the twilight. Occasionally, he appeared to deliberately change direction to avoid stepping on a particular mound.

All my instincts screamed at me to get as far away as possible. There was something wrong about him—a menacing vibe I couldn't pinpoint. But I was paralyzed by a visceral fear, unable to do anything but watch.

When he had almost reached the dark spot in the grass that marked my exit point, he stopped, turned back the way he had come, and whistled shrilly. After a moment, a smaller, four-legged shape slunk into view lower down the slope. It looked like a medium-sized dog, perhaps a lab, but the darkening sky was making it more and more difficult to recognize anything. Nose to the ground, it crept up the slope towards the dark man.

I watched with terrified fascination as the man and the dog approached the hole in the ground. What were they looking for? Did they know about me? Squatting here among the boulders in the gloom, I must be virtually invisible, just another rock. But while the man and the dog might have trouble *seeing* me it didn't mean they wouldn't be able to find me. Especially if the man realized the ground beneath him had been recently disturbed. In fact, I was sure the dog would be able to smell that moments ago I had stood in that very spot and was still nearby.

I was trying to decide whether or not to risk another dash further into the boulder field, when the dog stopped sniffing and pawing at the ground, raised its head, and looked in my direction. It then tensed in a perfect point, one front paw lifted, its body rigid in a straight line from nose to tail.

Shit! But before I could gather enough courage to sprint away, there came another explosion of sound, so loud this time, it was unbearable. I hardly had time to

wonder what was coming next, when a cloud both dark and strident covered me completely, and I knew no more.

Chapter 3: Anne

"Impossible," a voice muttered over my head. "She can't be. She's nothing like any of the others."

"On the contrary," said a second voice. This one had a high, vaguely haughty tone and came from somewhere near my right leg. "I'd say she has a great deal in common with the descriptions we've had of other travelers."

"How can you say that?" replied the first speaker. The warm, damp cloth lying across my forehead and eyes was abruptly removed. I heard a swishing sound and then a trickle of water.

"Look at her, Anne!" voice number one continued. Smooth hands pushed my hair up out of my face. "She's too young, too small, and judging by the state she was in when the sisters brought her here, much too weak!" Despite Number One's gruff words, the cloth was then gently returned, somewhat wetter and now cool. I tried not to react, as I wasn't ready to officially wake up.

"What kind of help could a kid like this give us, anyway?" he went on. "We need strength and knowledge. Not to mention hope."

"Who's to say she cannot offer us what we need?"

"No, it's got to be a mistake," the first voice said, as if Anne hadn't spoken. "I think the real traveler escaped to the mountains and this little girl was caught in the fray after he broke through. Maybe she's an Exile."

"Dressed as she is?" Anne replied. "Who is she, then? Have you ever seen clothes such as these, Michael?" Someone then lifted my left leg, bending it at the knee, slender hands cradling my ankle and calf. "'Look at her', I say to you! She is covered with grit, bruises, and abrasions. Look at her feet and her hands! She obviously forced her way out of something recently. And we know that someone has broken through. The sisters told us of the opening in the hillside. She is a traveler whether or not she fits your ill-conceived stereotype of what travelers should be." My leg was straightened and carefully set back down. "The mere fact that she survived at all proves that she has more strength than any of the others who have tried to come to Parl."

"Could've been luck," Michael grunted.

"Be that as it may, she is here now and I need to decide what to do with her."

"Traveler or not, she's plainly wiped out. But there's tension in her limbs. She'll probably wake in an hour or so. Then you can hear what she has to say. Should be interesting, if nothing else."

The cloth was lifted off my forehead, and someone rubbed a fragrant, oily substance into each of my temples. It was all I could do to lie still and not squirm away from the unfamiliar touch that was both tender and impersonal. At last, the hands left me and I was covered with a thin blanket. Soon after, I heard the sound of departing footsteps and the low thud of a door being closed.

I lay motionless listening to the quiet room, praying I'd been left alone. When I finally grew brave enough to open my eyes, my vision swam for a moment, and then cleared enough for me to see that the room was dimly lit and had a gray stone ceiling. I'd have to risk a little movement if I wanted to learn more.

I turned my head, wincing as the muscles in my neck cramped. Slowly and carefully, I sat up. My whole body ached, but I felt much better than I had on the hillside, less shaky and no longer sick with fear. The blanket slipped off, exposing my legs, which were bare below my short pajama bottoms. Anne was right. If the rest of my body was even half as damaged, I must be a mess. Scrapes and bruises covered both knees and shins. There was a long, jagged scratch on the side of my left calf and my other ankle was purplish and slightly swollen. Gingerly, I rotated my right foot in a small circle. The ankle felt sore, but I could move it at least.

Next, I held my hands out in front of me. Several of the nails had broken below the quick and the ones that remained were black with dirt and dried blood. I shuddered remembering how they'd gotten that way, then stopped myself. I couldn't waste time reliving it all. Who knew how long I'd be left to myself before someone decided to check on me? I needed to figure out what was going on, and taking stock of my surroundings seemed like a logical place to start.

The room was unassuming and simply furnished. My bed stood in its center. There was a fireplace set in one stone wall behind a small dining table and two wooden chairs, which stood close enough to the fire to take advantage of its light and warmth. The only other illumination came from a candle sitting by a basin of water on the table next to my bed. A red and blue rope rug lay on the gray stone floor and off-white, linen curtains covered the only window. There were no books, or pictures, or knick-knacks.

I stood up, intending to peek out the window, but forgetting my sore ankle. Pain streamed up my leg and I stumbled backwards, falling on the bed and knocking over the table in the process. With a hiss, the water from the basin extinguished the candle. I

covered my face with my hands unable to stop the tears. The table's crash would probably bring someone to check on me, and I didn't want to face anyone.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the door to the stone room opened. I looked up. Two figures stood in the doorway. I was pretty sure they were both women, but it was difficult to see them clearly. I blinked and wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand.

Yes. Definitely women. The shorter and plumper of the two rushed forward and handed me a small, soft cloth.

"Here you go, dearie," she said, with a musical voice colored by a thick accent I hadn't heard before. "Clean yer face as best as you can with this. Hmmm..." She looked me over. "We'll see about getting you a bath too, eh?" She turned to the other woman, appearing somewhat embarrassed. "Assumin' that's okay, a'course?"

"Certainly, Agatha," said the other, in a cool voice that I recognized instantly as that of "Anne".

Agatha began lighting candles, placing them in holders set in the walls. Anne remained in the shadowy doorway, backlit by the brighter lights in the hallway, making it impossible for me to see her face. I could tell, however, that she was tall and slender and had the shape and posture of a fairly young woman, despite her composed, mature voice.

After a moment, she moved into the light, and I couldn't help gasping at the sight of her. Here was a person who knew something about pain. While her right eye appeared deep and contemplative and was colored a warm, rich brown, her left eye was missing—the entire hollow between her forehead and her cheekbone filled with bumpy,

white scar tissue. I tried not to stare, but it was impossible not to look at her and wonder what had happened to cause such a gruesome injury. She glanced down at Agatha, who was mopping up the spilled water on the floor, giving me a chance to compose myself.

Once Agatha had righted the table and replaced the candle and basin, Anne shifted her attention back to me. "How are you feeling?"

I didn't even know where to start answering this question. Considering everything I'd been through recently, my feelings were all over the place.

"Pretty sore," I answered, deciding to assume the question concerned my physical condition and not my emotional state. "I don't think I'm seriously hurt, though."

Anne looked as though she expected me to elaborate on this. She brought a chair over from the table by the fire and sat down next to the bed with an expression of excitement and interest on her face that she was obviously trying to play down. Seen up close she was quite beautiful, making her contrasting disfigurement even more disturbing. I had been right about her age; she was in her early 20s, like me. Her hair was shoulder-length, black and wavy in a way that looked natural rather than permed or styled. Other than the scar tissue, her skin was the color of the beach at low tide, and perfectly clear and smooth. She had a long straight nose and a wide mouth, which lay in a firm line, almost a frown, when her face was at rest. She wore no makeup or jewelry and her gray floor-length gown was belted but otherwise plain. Still there was something regal and commanding about Anne. Perhaps it was the way Agatha had deferred to her earlier, but I had the sense that her relative youth notwithstanding, Anne was in charge.

We didn't speak, just watched each other for several minutes while Agatha finished tidying up the room. Anne did not appear to be disconcerted by our silence, and

while I had almost too many questions to handle, something kept me from asking any of them. Perhaps it was my usual restraint and need to remain unobtrusive, so automatic from living at CWCF, or maybe it was because I was reluctant to let her know I had no idea what the hell was going on, but I kept my mouth shut and waited.

Agatha, however, started to look more and more uneasy the longer we sat there without talking. She glanced at us frequently as she worked, and seemed relieved to be able to break the silence by asking Anne if she should start preparing the bath water.

"Not yet," Anne replied. "I'd like to speak with our guest for a few minutes first, if she doesn't mind waiting a little longer to get clean?"

She had directed this last to me. I gave a small shrug to indicate it was okay. Anne smiled in acknowledgement before turning back to Agatha.

"And send for Doctor Michael. Tell him his patient is awake and might need some attention."

After Agatha had left, Anne rose and went to a decanter that Agatha had left on the table by the fireplace.

"Well!" She poured a light-colored liquid into two handleless mugs made of a dark pottery. "Would you like something to drink? This is Ruchite wine. It's quite good, although we've had to prepare it ourselves the last few years. Are you familiar with it?"

"Uh, yes," I said. She looked surprised at this.

"Well, no," I answered, then flushed and stammered a bit more before continuing. "I mean, yes I'd like some and no I'm not familiar with it."

She walked back over to her chair by my bed, handed me a mug, then sat down and took a sip, looking at me expectantly. I peered into the cup. The contents were as

clear as water against the dark pottery, but had a wonderful fruity smell, and as I took my first taste, the muscles in my neck and shoulders started to relax.

Anne smiled and set her mug back on the table. Then she stood and began pacing back and forth across the room. She seemed flustered, which was out of character from what little I knew of her.

"I realize we are meeting under extraordinary circumstances, and as such, I really don't know the proper way for us to begin to get to know each other." She looked at me expectantly again, reminding me of the volunteer instructors who taught the inmate education programs at CWCF—pausing in the middle of a lesson in the hopes of receiving some sort of response—a nod, question, or comment—something that indicated the conversation wasn't completely one-sided. All I could manage now was a weak smile.

"I apologize if we haven't welcomed you in the way to which you are accustomed," she continued. "You see, we rarely get visitors like you; actually, we rarely have any kind of visitor. But no one like you has ever come to Parl—at least, as far as I know. And the knowledge we have of travelers who have assisted other communities is quite limited. We have great difficulty communicating with anyone, as I'm sure you are aware. So I'm afraid I'm already going to need a little bit of guidance from you, if you don't mind."

"Guidance?" I asked.

"Yes. How would you like to get started?"

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. I had hoped, after all, that *she* could give *me* guidance.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I don't know what you mean."

Her mouth twitched. Obviously this was not what she wanted to hear. Fortunately we were saved from further embarrassment when the door burst open and a heavy-set man stomped in. He was in his thirties and had straight, brown, shoulder-length hair and a full beard and mustache. His eyes were deep set, rather small, and they never stayed still, constantly darting around like two hummingbirds each trapped in its own cage. Like Anne, he was dressed in gray, but instead of a gown he wore a long-sleeved shirt and loose pants that gathered at the ankles. Unlike the women's clothing, this man's outfit looked familiar. In fact, it reminded me of the pullover sweatshirts and sweat pants we used to wear on cool evenings in the dorm at UCLA, except this was made out of a coarse fabric instead of fleece.

"Michael," Anne said in a stern voice. She had regained her composure. "As you can see, our visitor is now awake. She does not believe her injuries are severe, but I thought you could take another look at her, just in case."

"Right," Michael said, coming over and sitting in the chair by the bed. He placed a couple of additional candles on the table and lit them. They cast a strong, brilliant light, making me squint.

"All right, then," Michael said, his restless eyes flicking over me. "I didn't catch yer name. Makes it easier for me when I know who I'm examining, eh?" He had the same accent as Agatha, although not as pronounced.

"Oh," I said, a little put off by his gruff manner. "Uh...I'm Lindsay."

"Lindsay, huh? Well, Lindsay, why don't you tell me how you got so banged up?"

"Excuse me, Michael," Anne broke in. "I really don't think we need to burden Lindsay right now with the trauma of reliving her ordeal. Please limit your questions to those that pertain to her present condition."

Michael exhaled noisily, then glared at Anne for a moment before grumbling through clenched teeth. "Knowing the cause of her injuries helps me to evaluate her 'present condition'." Tired and confused as I was, even I didn't miss the way he mimicked her clipped and formal way of speaking.

"I'm sure it does," Anne replied, not altering her tone in the slightest. "And I certainly don't wish to hamper your efforts unnecessarily. However, I have concerns that extend beyond the medical needs of our visitor."

"Fine," Michael snapped. "But don't blame me if she deteriorates."

I stiffened. What did he mean by "deteriorate"? But neither of them was paying any attention to me and before I could work up the courage to ask, Anne was moving purposefully towards the door.

"You do not need to worry, Michael. The last thing I'd ever do is blame you without cause." She put her hand on the door handle but didn't open it. "Lindsay, I need to attend to another matter. I'll have Agatha bring you some bath water after Michael has finished. Then perhaps you might like to have something to eat and rest for a while. We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

"You're leaving?" Michael said, somehow managing to sound both sarcastic and incredulous simultaneously. "Your *traveler* is here and you've suddenly got something better to do?"

"Nothing better, no. But if she is a traveler, there's no need to rush, and if she's not..." Anne shrugged. "Then my leaving to see to one of my countless other responsibilities can hardly matter, can it?" And without waiting for a response she strode out, closing the door firmly behind her.

I was not happy to be left alone with a strange, seemingly angry man who intended to give me a physical examination. I hadn't had much recent contact with men except for the male guards in C Yard, and my interactions with them made me even more skittish.

Fortunately, Michael's demeanor had softened for some reason. He even whistled to himself as he laid out his instruments.

After setting one of those extraordinarily bright candles into a hinged holder that could be raised into different positions, then arranging it so it was inches from my face, he said, "Let me know if you are going to sneeze or anything so I can move this out of the way. You'll get a nasty burn if you touch the flame."

And with those reassuring words, he began the examination, first checking my eyes, ears, and mouth with a small wooden scope, and then grasping my hands and feet in turn, moving my limbs in various directions. He didn't say anything except to ask if particular movements were painful, and to request that I flex different muscles. When he'd finished, he told me there shouldn't be any lasting effects from my injuries.

"Take it easy the next couple of days and you'll be fine. You're young and that makes all the difference with these sorts of hurts. How old are you, anyway? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"Uh, no. I'm twenty-four."

"Good Lord!" His tiny eyes widened in stunned amazement. I was used to people being surprised to find out my true age (although they usually guessed me to be only three or four years younger—not ten) but I'd never seen such a shocked reaction before. He eyed me suspiciously, his gruff, guarded manner back in place.

"Well, you sure don't look it," he said then swept up his instruments in one hurried motion and rushed to the door.

"I'll tell Agatha we've finished," he called over his shoulder. And before I could open my mouth to answer, he was gone.

What was that all about? It was clear my being an adult bothered him for some reason. I tried to remember everything I could about Anne and Michael's earlier conversation and compare it to this more recent interaction. But my mind wasn't focusing very well and I was relieved when Agatha arrived a moment later wheeling in a large, wooden tub on a handcart. Two young boys and a girl followed, all carrying buckets filled with steaming water.

"Ah, dearie!" Agatha said. A huge smile spread across her face. "Yer looking better already! I'm so glad! How does a nice, hot bath and something to eat sound?"

"It sounds wonderful," I said.

And it was wonderful, although the water started out nearly too hot to be comfortable. It took me almost a minute to slowly lower myself into the steaming tub after Agatha and the kids had left. Once I was used to the heat though, I completely relaxed, joyfully letting my body go limp and my mind drift. For the moment, I didn't care where I was or how I'd gotten there, I just leaned back and luxuriated. The hot water soothed my hurts, and being able to wash away the dirt and grime I'd

accumulated—using a sponge and a round vanilla-scented soap—helped something small and hard that was buried deep inside me start to unclench.

But by far the best part of the whole experience was the fact that for the first time in five years I had complete privacy. *I was alone*. During all of the time I'd spent in prison, what I longed for even more than freedom was to have a little time to myself. Time where I knew no one was watching me, where I didn't have to worry about how my actions would affect someone else, where I could let my guard down. You don't appreciate what a gift it is to be alone until you've lived day after day, 24/7, surrounded by strangers, some of whom are hostile and even violent. A hot bath by myself was simply decadent.

Agatha, however, had been reluctant to leave.

"I wouldn't want you to faint in the bath, after all," she'd said. "I could stay with you, in case you need some help."

"No, I'm really feeling much better," I had replied, trying not to sound too eager for her to go. "Besides, I'm sure you have lots to do."

"Too true," she said. "We've got a full house these days, and two of my girls are ailing. The Doctor Michael says they only have a touch o' flux, and should be up and about soon enough, but it has left me a bit short-handed. The kids can only help so much, you see."

I wasn't sure I did, but I nodded anyway. She sighed. "Well t'be on the safe side, I'll leave you with this." She fished around in one of her apron pockets and pulled out a silver dinner bell. "Ring if you start to feel dizzy or need help. I'll be workin' right down the hall and should hear you fine."

"Thank you," I said, my voice cracking. To my surprise and extreme embarrassment, my eyes filled with tears. I hadn't been treated kindly in a long time and while I'd become a master at hiding my pain and fear, I did not know how to stay stoic in the face of compassion.

"Sorry. It's just...you've been so nice. I appreciate it."

She smiled sympathetically and I had the feeling if she'd known me a little better, she would have taken me in her arms and let me sob into her motherly chest. "Ah, dearie, it's truly my pleasure. I can tell by looking at you that you've had a time of it for a while now—not just today. You look like you need some caring, and I'm happy t' do it."

After the bath, I dried myself with a towel warmed by the fire, which was as soft as if it had been made of combed fleece. Since my pajamas were so torn and filthy that you couldn't even tell that they'd originally been a blue plaid, I decided to put on the clothes Agatha had left for me. They consisted of a gray gown similar to Anne's and soft sheepskin booties. There was no bra or underpants, but the dress was floor-length and I was fairly flat-chested, so I decided it didn't matter.

The dress was a little long, but the rest fit pretty well. I wished I had a mirror so that I could see what I looked like. I hadn't worn a dress in a long time, and I was also morbidly curious to see if my face was as scratched and bruised as the rest of my body. On second thought, it was probably better I couldn't see myself since the myriad of wounds and scrapes on my arms and legs were even more pronounced now that they were no longer coated with dirt.

Before long, Agatha came back into the room with her crew of kids to remove the bath paraphernalia and bring me something to eat.

"Excuse me? Um, Agatha?" I asked as she placed a mug, a piece of bread, and a bowl of what looked like thick soup, smelling positively delicious, on the table by the fire.

"Yes, my dear?" She turned and looked at me. "Oh don't you look nice! I thought that dress would fit you. It belonged to my niece, but she couldn't wear it but more than a few times, she outgrew it so fast!"

"How old is your niece?" I asked distracted from my original questions. At 5'2", I had always been on the short side of the spectrum height-wise, but was certainly still in the realm of normal. I was beginning to realize that here I might be considered unusually, maybe even *freakishly*, short. Everyone I'd met so far had been at least a head taller than me. In fact even the kids with Agatha looked taller, although it was hard to tell for sure, since I was sitting and they were standing.

"She's eleven, and looking to be quite lanky like her pa, my brother, 'tis true. You are a bitty little thing, aren't you? The doctor said you're twenty-four years old? Is that right?"

"Yes," I answered. "And where I come from, I am smaller than most, but not the shortest, by any means."

"Well, I'd be most interested to hear all about where you come from. I gather it's quite different, but the Lead doesn't wish to trouble you overmuch with talk just yet."

"The Lead? Who is that?"

"Why Miss Anne of course," she answered as if this should have been self-evident. "Didn't you see her eye? To be sure she only arrived from the Del two months ago. An' I

expect we are all still getting used to each other. Her ways are quite different from our last Lead." Her normally pleasant, musical voice hardened a little here.

"Who was that?" I asked, feeling stupider by the second.

"Ooh! Now that was Mr. Jacob. He was our Lead for the last 20 years and I don't think there was ever a better one. His *leg* is what was taken, don'tcha know."

Still clueless, but determined not to let it show, I made what I thought was an appropriate noise of awed sympathy.

She nodded seriously, and then went on. "He was struck down last spring." She looked at her feet for a long moment, her lips moving silently as if she were praying. I couldn't make out what she was saying, but it seemed private, so I didn't interrupt. Once she'd finished, she let out a small sigh before raising her eyes back to me. "And then Miss Anne came to us!" Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes and the brightness in her voice sounded forced.

I was just working up my courage to ask her to tell me more about Anne, when a surge of dizziness wiped the question from my mind. I swayed and closed my eyes, hoping to block out the nauseating sensation that the walls were dissolving around me. Agatha came quickly to my side making clucking noises, and then put a hand on my shoulder to steady me. Its cool strength spread through the fabric of the gown.

"But look what I've gone and done! I've rambled on and on when yer supposed to be restin' and restorin' yerself! Come, lie down now, dearie."

I nodded, afraid that I'd throw up if I risked opening my mouth. With eyes still closed, and Agatha's firm touch guiding my descent, I slumped backward until my head rested on the pile of pillows at the top of the bed. They were fluffy and cool—so billowy

that my head sank deep among them and the smooth fabric of the pillowcases brushed against my cheeks.

"Thanks," I said. "I guess I'm still a little shaken up. I feel better now."

"Will you take some food? I have a tray, so you can eat in bed if you have a mind."

"Okay."

"I thought you might like somethin' simple, at least until you get yer strength back."

She adjusted the pillows so I was propped up, brought the tray over to the bed, and set it on my lap. The soup's aroma at such close range chased away the rest of the queasiness and I took an enthusiastic bite. It tasted even better than it smelled.

After several mouthfuls, however, sleepiness began to replace dizziness and hunger as my primary physical condition. "Agatha?" I asked, stifling a yawn.

She broke from tidying the bath things and turned.

"Sorry to interrupt."

"Ah, it's no bother, dearie. I'm always cleaning something. If you waited fer me to stop, you'd never get to ask me anything and I'd miss out on some good conversation."

"When do you think Anne, uh...*Miss Anne* I mean, will want to talk to me?"

"Well there's really no tellin'. I gave up tryin' to figure out the ways of the authority years ago. By their very nature they do the unexpected. Comes from the training they get at the Del, I expect. Still, *Miss Anne* hasn't been too unpredictable as of yet. If she said it'd be after you had a chance to rest, then I think you can trust to that."

"Do you think anyone else will want to see me *before Anne*?"

"No, dearie. The Lead has let it be known that no one is to bother you. I'll be done in here right quick and then you'll have some time to yerself to sleep and heal."

Once she'd gone, I returned to my tray but didn't think I could stay awake long enough to finish eating. I finally gave up the struggle, put the tray on the bedside table, and blew out all but one of the candles. It might not have been the smartest move from a fire-safety perspective, but I hated the idea of lying alone in a strange place in total darkness.

I settled back on the pillows. Despite everything, it was such a relief to be able to stretch out by myself on a comfortable bed. And it wasn't long before fatigue overpowered me and carried me away.

"God damn it, Sheila! Where the fuck's my black shirt?"

It was all so familiar, at first I didn't realize I was back. Monique's voice echoed across the room piercing through the thick haze of sleep.

It must be almost time to get up, I thought. Although most of my roommates didn't wake up until they had to, Monique often rose earlier than the rest of us. She usually started harassing people just prior to first bell, her loud profanity more reliable than an alarm clock.

Sheila mumbled something incomprehensible, but whiny, in response. Hoping to get a few more minutes of oblivion, I rolled onto my side toward the wall—then instantly flipped back again, wide-awake. Lying on my side *hurt*—like my whole body was bruised and scraped raw. My ankle throbbed with a violent, angry beat.

What the hell was wrong with me?

All of a sudden, images from the night before bombarded me: being trapped underground...clawing my way free...the moguls...the strange man and the dog...the roar...Agatha...Michael... Anne.

I sat up so fast I almost banged my head on Lorrinda's bunk. The blanket fell away, and I was completely naked—no blue plaid pajamas, no gray gown either. My body was pasty, bruises and scrapes as pronounced as tattoos against my pale skin.

With its typical jarring clang, the first bell rang, signaling the start of the day. Seconds later Lorrinda's head dropped over the edge of her bunk, her long braids swinging gently like expensive, ropy fringe.

Lorrinda was also an early riser. She wrote letters to her kids in the early morning, while it was still relatively quiet. Determined that her children would not think her ignorant, she'd ask me to proofread and edit each letter before it was mailed. She rarely made a mistake, and after I'd done the first couple, I told her that they really were fine without my input. But, fine wasn't good enough—she wanted perfection.

"It's bad enough they have a mom who's a criminal," she'd say. "I don't want them to think she's a fool too."

Now she vaulted down from her bunk and perched on the edge of mine as the rest of our roommates grumbled to each other and started to get ready for the day. Her eyes were down, busy scanning a page in the spiral-bound notebook she used for first drafts. When she finally looked up at me, her mouth dropped open.

"Jesus Christ," she gasped. "What the fuck happened to you? Was someone in here last night? How'd I sleep through it? Was it Mack?"

"I don't think so." I yanked the blanket up to cover myself, clutching the excess fabric to my chest.

"*What the fuck happened?*" She spoke in a fierce whisper so our roommates wouldn't overhear. "Who did this to you?"

I scrunched my face up in an effort to close my eyes as tightly as possible. What answer could I give her? Had I dreamed it all? Then what about the bruises? I lay back on the bed, and tried to get control of myself. It had all seemed so real. But it couldn't be.

"Lindsay?" Lorrinda's voice cut into my thoughts.

"Uh huh?"

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"Just a bad dream, I guess." I was getting a headache from the strain of squeezing my eyes shut.

"Dream, my ass! Somebody hurt you last night. Have you *seen* yourself? You didn't get beat up like that just *dreamin'*."

"No one beat me up." *It was only a dream. It was only a dream.* I kept repeating the words in my head, trying to convince myself.

"Bullshit! Who was it? Was it a con?"

"No." *Only a dream. Only a dream. A dream.*

"Tell me the bitch's name. I'll kick the ass right off her stanky body!"

"Nobody beat me up." *Dream. Dream. Dream.*

The second bell rang. I opened my eyes. We had ten minutes to get to breakfast. Most of our roommates had left already. I was calm now, maybe too calm—dazed and

foggy like I had taken an antihistamine. I sat up, gathered the blanket around myself like a shawl, ducked past Lorrinda, and limped over to my locker. My ankle *was* sore but I could put some weight on it so it couldn't be too badly sprained.

I took a quick look in the mirror that hung on the inside of my locker door. My nose was scratched; my cheeks looked scraped raw and were ragged with shredded skin. The hollows under my eyes were purple, not quite bruised but darker than simple lack of sleep would explain. Lorrinda's face, reflected in the mirror, watched me critically. It was obvious she thought I was lying, and I couldn't blame her. After struggling into some underwear, I took a long-sleeved turtleneck shirt and a pair of jeans out of my locker, and began gingerly easing into them. I'd roast in such warm clothes, but with some heavy makeup to camouflage the marks on my face, the baggy clothes should mask the rest of my injuries. I doubted anyone would pay close enough attention to notice the stiff, careful way I moved. And if they did, it probably wouldn't matter. Unless we were so bad off that we couldn't get out of bed, the guards usually ignored our health problems.

Lorrinda, on the other hand, was unlikely to ignore anything. She scowled at me. We were friends and I was hiding something from her.

"Look," I told her. "I can't explain what happened to me. I don't remember anyone coming in here last night."

"Maybe you been drugged. You think you were raped?"

I paused, considering. Someone could have drugged, raped, and beaten me. Maybe whatever drug they'd used caused vivid, elaborate dreams. Still there was no pain or wetness between my legs and I didn't think I'd been sexually assaulted. But the

possibility was there and it brought back all the fears I'd had when I first arrived at CWCF. I knew it would be awhile before I looked upon sleep as an escape again.

"I don't know, Lorrinda...maybe."

I checked the mirror again. The clothes and make-up helped; my face was still swollen, but no longer red and raw. I was pretty sure I could make it through the day without attracting too much attention.

Lorrinda's reflection studied me with a worried, angry expression. "Well, I'll do a little research amongst the bitches, and see what I can find out."

It's strange how life goes on and your mind can cope with the most unbelievable situations, because no matter what, the mundane basics of living stay the same. I'd had so many abrupt transitions in my life—going from one remote part of the world to another with my parents, starting college, getting involved with Preston, the arrest, the trial, CWCF, and now this strange dream or hallucination or whatever it was—but nothing essentially changed. No matter how crazy the circumstances or how unreal the situation, the world was still regular and familiar. I expected *the feel* of things to change in some profound way. But it didn't. After a while I still got hungry and tired, had to pee, felt bored, restless, depressed.

The day I woke up naked and bruised, in one way convinced I had somehow been transported from CWCF the night before, but in another way just as sure that I hadn't, I surprised myself once again with how normally I went through my day and how *typical* everything seemed. For the most part I interacted with people like I usually did. They were the same—completely familiar—and so was the prison routine. A couple of times I

accidentally bumped a sore spot on my body, which instantly reminded me of the experience the night before and then that it couldn't have actually taken place. The stone in the pit of my stomach would sink a few centimeters lower and all of the questions would return. But after a long moment everything would go back to normal again. Most of the day, I was able to put it out of my mind.

If anything, Lorrinda worried about it more than I did. She went out of her way to check on me—asking me questions and appearing to analyze my responses, to see if I was acting like myself, I supposed. At lunch, I saw her scan the cafeteria with suspicious eyes, taking a special interest in the condition of people's hands—both inmates and guards. Her temper was unusually short. As Lorrinda's friend, I was under her protection. The fact that someone had hurt me meant her position was vulnerable as well.

I didn't have the energy, though, to worry about my effect on her. As evening grew closer, my anxiety-level increased. After the last bell sounded, but before lights-out, I took some empty coke cans and lined them up next to my bunk. If anyone approached the bed, the cans would clatter to the floor, which was sure to wake someone.

Then I undressed. Since my blue pajamas were nowhere to be found, I pulled on an old UCLA t-shirt and some flannel boxer shorts. The boxers had belonged to Preston, and while I hated being reminded of him, at least the stretched-out elastic waistband and soft, well-worn flannel were comfortable.

C yard was settling down for the night, and its familiar noise had dimmed somewhat. Right before the final count of the day, Lorrinda crouched down next to my bunk, sending the cans crashing to the floor in a heap of shiny red aluminum.

"What the fuck was that?" Monique shouted from across the room.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with, bitch!" Lorrinda shot back. She lowered her voice and nodded approvingly. "That's a good idea." I gathered cans, scooping them up into the bottom of my t-shirt with my head down.

"Anything weird happen today?" she asked.

"Nope. Normal day."

"Your face looks a little better."

"Yeah, well it's not hurting so much anymore." I shrugged and tried to sound nonchalant. "Maybe I just fell out of bed, or something." This was weak, I knew, but I felt obligated to give her *some* explanation.

She brightened.

"You know, my nephew walks in his sleep. When he was seven he got out of the house one night—through the dead bolt, chain, everything—and into the street. One of the neighbors found him and brought him back. He never woke up. Scared my sister half to death. She said she could never sleep as soundly after that since she was always listening to see if he'd get out again."

She glanced down at the coke cans, now back in place like a row of shiny toy soldiers.

"I guess those'd wake *you* up too, if you fell out again."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

The coke cans were still upright the next morning, and the one after that. Soon I stopped bothering with them. After a week, both my bruises and my apprehension faded. Regular, tedious, typical CWCF monotony returned.

And the more time that passed, the more I became convinced that what I'd told Lorrinda was in fact the case: I'd merely had an extremely vivid dream one night and hurt myself falling out of bed—nothing more than that.

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