



CHAPTER 1

A BOTTLE ATOP A tiny two-drawer cabinet next to a larger two-drawer cabinet. Where had she seen this before?

The cabinets were brown. The bottle was brown. The cork, brown. The gravel beneath her feet, the hills around Horsetooth Dam, the rowboats nearby, even the clouds in the dark sky. Brown. Differing shades of brown, as far as she could tell in the moonlight, but brown nonetheless. The dress he had made her put on—simple and old-fashioned, with eggshell-colored lace serving as trim around the collar and the tight short sleeves—was a warm chocolate brown.

Undressing in front of him had made her tremble. Not because of the cool June night in the Rocky Mountain foothills but because she dreaded what would come next. She was proud of having remained chaste and she didn't want to lose her virginity now. Not like this. But he hadn't raped her. Instead, he had just stared at her nakedness and smiled. His dark eyes were wild and still. They didn't scan her body as she would have anticipated; rather, his stare pinned her in place, rendering her useless to fight back or run or scream.

But she *was* strong enough, fast enough, crazy enough to fight back. Even after sleeping off the roofie or whatever it was that he had slipped

into her drink, so disoriented when she had awakened that she had no clue what time or even what day it was. She had lain in the dark room for what seemed like hours, trying to clear her mind, regain her strength, calculate a way out of this mess. She had pretended she was with her mother, laying her head on her lap, feeling hands stroke her hair, and hearing her say everything was going to be all right. And she had felt strong again.

When she had tried the doorknob in the dark room, it didn't give. The only window was covered by a steel grate that had been welded on the inside of the frame. There was no escape. He had done this before, she had thought. She wasn't his first prisoner. Or his last. And then a second thought had come to her. She hadn't heard or read anything recently about women disappearing or dead bodies being found. A wave of relief had washed over her mind then. She wasn't going to die after all. She just had to do what her abductor told her to do.

So, here she stood, focusing all her energy on being still, obedient. Dressed like a settler, complete with a homespun apron, and standing amid the bizarre props he had pulled from the back of his truck.

He had promised her earlier that night that if she obeyed his every instruction, he would not harm her. But if she did not obey he would turn his attention to Julia. She would not let that happen. Even if it killed her.

Her frazzled nerves had paralyzed the part of her brain that was trying to recall where she'd seen this setting before. The odd cabinets they had both carefully placed near the water's edge at his instruction, the wooden cane he was carrying, the dress. It was somehow familiar, but she couldn't quite recall why. And why did it even matter whether she had seen this before? Something primordial demanded it of her, though. She *must* know the reason for all this.

Neither his stare nor his smile had changed, even after she had finished dressing. What was he fantasizing about her? Was she his maid? His pilgrim? His little woman in his little house on some stupid prairie out west?

But the shoes. They were the most confusing part of all. Her high-top leather basketball shoes and tube socks were heaped by the shoreline next to her blue jeans, T-shirt, and green CSU hoodie. Next to the heap was a pair of tan Converse low-top tennis shoes with no laces.

He told her to slip on the shoes.

For some reason, this was deeply disturbing. The shoes didn't match the dress. Not that she had any fashion sense whatsoever. That was Julia's talent, not hers. Something in the pit of her stomach lurched at the thought of Julia slipping on the shoes instead of her, making his threat and her compliance more important than ever. It was all much too surreal for her. Surreal.

Obedience, she told herself. Be obedient, and live. She slipped her feet into the shoes.

His smile widened. "Sit."

He hadn't hurt her. He had always been gentle, as well as meticulous, careful, prepared. As she sat watching, he spent a painfully long time positioning the props, particularly the bottle. She could see it better now. The combined shape formed by both the bottle and the smaller cabinet to the right was identical to the silhouette that had been cut away in the bottom door of the larger cabinet to the left. Or, seen another way, the shadowy cutout in the door of the cabinet on the left was mirrored in the posed objects on the right. A shadow of the small reflected on the large? Mirror images? Art mimicking art? The overpowering connection of this setting with a faint memory irritated her.

"Like my handiwork?" he purred.

She glanced away, disturbed that he had noticed her soaking up the scene, trying to figure out what this was all about. And why it seemed so familiar, yet elusive.

"Please. Why are you doing this?" was all she could manage.

"Recognizable, isn't it?"

Was he a mind reader too?

He turned his back to her and reached into the camper top of his pickup, which he'd pulled onto the rocky beach nearby. He was unwinding a long hose that looked a lot like the air compressor hoses she'd used at work. She hadn't seen this type before. Her eyes followed the hose to where it was connected to a large tank tucked toward the front of the truck bed. Panic swelled in her belly, constriction overtook her throat. She sprang to her feet, tears burning her eyes.

"Please, please, don't hurt me," she sobbed.

“Hush,” he cooed, dropping the nozzle at her feet and touching her elbow lightly. “We had a deal. I won’t hurt you or Julia if you just let me finish.”

“What are you going to do?”

She wasn’t really sure she wanted an answer to that question, but she was sure she needed to keep talking. She needed to hear her own voice, as if awakening herself from this horrible nightmare.

“This won’t take long,” he said as he guided her back onto the ground and walked behind her. He started fondling her hair, twisting and stroking it between the pads of his fingers and thumbs. “Now pull your lovely brown hair up in a knot, just above the nape of your neck.”

She did as she was told, trembling with fright as she wrapped her long hair in a tight bun. He handed her a band and pins to secure the knot. She heard the gravel crunch beneath his feet as he backed away from her. She stole a glance over her shoulder and saw him staring at her, holding his hands to form a picture frame as if capturing a snapshot with her in the foreground and the cabinets and reservoir in the background.

“Look across the water, will you, Jill?”

She did as she was told. She heard him groan with pleasure.

“Now, please stand up and take the dress and shoes off again.”

Trembling, she handed him the dress and shoes, and he set them aside. She was standing stark naked in front of him once again. The disconnect between his lack of interest in her nudity and his interest in her surroundings was like a cold finger dragging along her spine. He placed a folded towel in the shallow water and said, “Sit, please.”

“It’s . . . it’s so cold. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Haven’t you ever heard of the fable about Jonah being swallowed by a whale?”

“Yes,” she said in a small voice.

“Then you know you can.”

He was insane, she thought. Certifiable. Stay calm. And keep him talking. “What do you mean?”

“Jonah was strong. Very strong.” He smiled. “Jonah lived in the belly of a whale for years, decades. And he never complained of the cold, now did he?”

Her eyes widened. She glanced down at the submersed towel, a terrycloth manta ray floating in the shallows, wings bending back and forth, back and forth. She felt sick.

“Did he?” he barked.

She shook her head and bent on shaky knees, lowering herself onto the soggy towel.

“Never,” he answered.

She wrapped her long arms around her knees, hugging herself into a fetal position. He squatted behind her, placing his hot, sweaty hands on her shoulders to keep from tottering. He struggled to pull something from his pocket with his right hand.

“What’s that?”

“Nutrition.”

Just as she felt his hot breath on her bare shoulder, she felt the prick of the needle in her right arm and immediately relaxed. A sudden euphoria enveloped her. This was all going to be okay, she thought. He wasn’t going to hurt her. She wasn’t going to catch her death of cold in this frigid water. In fact, it felt more like a Jacuzzi now. She was beginning to feel drowsy. He wasn’t behind her anymore, but she didn’t remember him leaving. Her body was warm and tingly. Maybe he was gone. Maybe it was all over now. She had nothing to fear.

Then she heard the squeak of a knob turning and the hose on the beach wiggled to life with a hiss. Her heart raced and her mind willed herself awake. She sat erect, fighting gravity to keep her head from lolling toward her chest. He was coming toward her again, the hose hissing near his feet. Her instincts told her to run, but when she moved to stand, her legs were too heavy to pull from the water, her arms too heavy to throw a punch. It was hard enough just to breathe.

She felt him slowly lower her shoulders to the ground, her limbs too weak to fight the fatigue. The water tickled her ears. He had promised her that everything would go back to normal again. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe that she would wake up and this would all be over. She wanted to sleep. She wanted to laugh at the water for licking her ears. But a small part of her still wanted to scream.

Her mind drifted to Jonah in the belly of that stinking whale. To what her captor had said about Jonah not complaining even after years, decades, in the belly.

“Three days,” she croaked, remembering what Allan had told her. After only three days, the whale spat Jonah out on the beach at God’s command. It wasn’t a fable; it was a story from the Bible. He had it all wrong. It was days, just three days, not years or decades. Her mind floated away with the tide, with the whale, Jonah free.

In a burst of clarity, she was back at Horsetooth. She wasn’t sure if she said the words aloud, but they came out like an echo in her ears, thick and slurred. “Please, I won’t tell anyone.”

Through the heavy fog in her head, she heard him say, “Neither will I.”