

Chapter One

The first thing she noticed was the sound. Metal wheels rolling on rails, thrumming in time with her heartbeat. Instinct whispered that if she could only screw up the courage to pry open her eyes, she would see the world hurtling past with the breathless rush of a roller coaster. But that kind of courage had deserted her.

How long had she been sitting upright, hands clasped in her lap, knees and ankles pressed together as tightly as if they were bound? Hours? Days? Despite the gradual unraveling, thread by delicate thread, of the heavy curtain that separated consciousness from the abyss, the answer proved elusive.

Her mouth tasted as toxic as the dregs at the bottom of a mezcal bottle. Had she had too much to drink? Was that why she felt so fuzzy? She couldn't remember.

If she refused to think about it, did that mean it wasn't so?

The chill of refrigerated air stippling her flesh with goosebumps was a reliable indicator that at least her sensory perceptions were in working order. Rubbing her arms, she continued the inventory—sense of touch, check. The ropy odor of a pot smoker nearby—olfactory, check. Valley Girl chatter somewhere behind her—hearing, check.

There, the inventory came to an abrupt halt. To test her sense of sight would mean facing a truth too grotesque to name. A truth that was hammering at her brain like a little demon with a pickaxe;

The raucous blare of the train's horn ripped the decision out of her control and for a split-second, her eyes flew open. The split-second was time enough to absorb the sight of gauzy mist drifting above grey, choppy water.

Ocean. West Coast. United States. Pacific.

Words that floated through her head, failing to attach themselves to any personal meaning. A thousand questions wanted to form, but the little demon wouldn't let them. More untethered words came at her, and this time, she reached for them:

Breathe.

Relax.

Focus.

Five times; ten times; fifty. Silently, she mouthed the mantra until the outside sounds receded and the demon was vanquished.

The abyss welcomed her back.

Loud metallic clanging startled her awake again.

A railroad crossing. It's just a railroad crossing.

No point in trying to keep her eyes closed any longer. She arched her back, wriggled her toes inside her shoes, stretched out the kinks in her legs. How long had she been unconscious this time?

Long enough for the scenery beyond the window to have changed. Scrubby weeds and dirt replaced the ocean. Beyond the train tracks, patches of dense fog brooded low to the ground like a ghost cat on the prowl, an eerie landscape where anything might be lurking.

The train rounded a bend in the tracks, slowing as it approached a graffiti-covered truss bridge. Vaguely aware of her fellow passengers beginning to stir, she pressed her cheek to the cool window, straining to see up ahead. There was the coastline again; there, a neat patch of yellow rental umbrellas and beach chairs lined up on the sand; a long wooden pier jutting over the ocean. A half-mile later, the sand-colored walls of the Crowne Plaza rising from the promenade. The conductor announced Ventura Station.

Like a convict whose cell door unexpectedly swings open offering freedom, she lurched to her feet and stepped into the aisle. The exit sign at the far end of the carriage beckoned but she faltered, distracted by a murmuring inside her ear.

They all think you're crazy.

That's because you are crazy.

She gave her head a sharp shake, but the whispers expanded to a murmur, swelled into a loud buzzing, exploded, finally, into a cacophony.

Her hands were slick with sweat. Swaying with the motion of the train, she grasped hold of the royal blue upholstered seat backs for balance and took a few unsteady steps forward. Ahead of her, the carriage bent and elongated—a hall of mirrors. The end of the compartment stretched to infinity.

Waves of nausea swept over her. She would not be able to make it to the washroom without collapsing. Gulping like a landed fish, she slumped into an empty aisle seat and leaned forward, elbows on thighs, willing herself not to vomit on the floor.

The soft touch of a hand on her shoulder made her jump. “Are you okay?”

Ignore it. You're hallucinating.

“Miss? Hey, miss?”

Sane people don't act like this.

“I'm gonna call the conductor. You don't look so...”

Not a hallucination.

“I'm fine. I'm fine.” She looked up sideways and pasted on what she hoped was a smile, though she suspected it emerged as more of a grimace. The truth was, her face was hot and tingling and she was shaking like a dry drunk.

The man, probably someone's grandpa judging from the wrinkled skin and concerned eyes, looked unconvinced. “Are you sure? I'd be glad to...”

“No,” she interrupted, more firmly this time. “I'm fine, really.” An image flashed in her head: a chorus line of pink elephants in tutus. A wholly incongruous giggle slipped past her lips. “Really!” she repeated.

He shot her one more troubled look before returned to his seat across the aisle, where he continued to watch her—she could feel his eyes on her. And something about his scrutiny made her uneasy.

By sheer force of will, pretending she was just a normal person on a train, she pushed herself straight in her seat and closed her eyes. She began to count

silently, slowly, focusing on each number as it moved across her eyelids, as if it were a buoy in the middle of the ocean, placed there for her to cling to.

You can do it. You can do it. You can do it.

What am I? The fucking little engine that could?

Watch your language!

Shut up.

By the time she reached twenty, her breathing was steadier. Ignoring the elderly man across the aisle, she pulled herself to her feet again. She was a tightrope walker on a high wire. The exit sign was the termination point she must reach without falling off.

She moved past the Valley Girl, still yakking on her cell phone. Past the pot smoker, the sickly sweet odor wafting off him like the dirty cloud over Pigpen's head in the Charlie Brown cartoons. He jerked his chin at her, trying to catch her attention, but she could not afford to be distracted.

It turned out that the exit door was as far as she could make herself go. Debarking passengers flowed around her, new passengers climbed aboard. Some threw curious glances as they maneuvered around the person pressed against the wall, fingers locked around the handrail as tightly as a barnacle clinging to a rusted hull.

She could already read the questions on the face of the conductor who was ambling along the platform toward her. Is this your station? Are you staying on the train? Where are you headed? Her need to avoid those questions was stronger than her desire to remain in the relative safety of the train.

He was only a few feet away from her now. This was her only chance to escape a confrontation. Sucking in a deep breath for courage, she managed to release her grip on the handrail. Deliberately looking away from the conductor, she jumped down from the step, and as though she knew where she was going, walked briskly in the opposite direction.

The Ventura Amtrak station was a mere strip of concrete, maybe 50 yards long. A couple of benches, an electronic ticket machine. She hurried to the end of the wrought iron fence separating the tracks from the street.

"You're late."

Her heart was pounding like a runaway horse as she swung to face the man who had spoken the accusation. Not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed, she saw that he was addressing the Valley Girl, who stood there with her hands on her hips, earbuds still plugged in.

"Oh, like I was driving the train or something," Valley Girl said in a rude tone. "It's only five-thirty anyway. We're not all that late."

The pair hurried off, still grumbling at each other. As she watched them climb into an Audi parked at the curb and drive away, the train's engine began to rev. At the same moment, a sudden sharp breeze sprang up from the ocean, nipping at her bare arms, reminding her too late that she had brought no jacket with her to cover her thin T-shirt.

No purse, either, she realized in a panic, jamming her fists into the pockets

of her Levi's, first the front, then the back. She clawed at the denim in desperation, but her pockets were empty. Not so much as a dime hid in the seams. No ID, either.

You don't get on a train without some means to buy a ticket—cash, credit card—cell phone...

Whirling around, she dashed back onto the platform, but the behemoth was already on the move. "Hey!" she yelled, running alongside the train, heedless of the massive steel wheels turning mere inches from her feet; beating her fist uselessly on the siding. "Hey, wait! Wait!"

The last compartment lumbered past, forcing her to jump back as it picked up speed. How could she have been so stupid? Alone now in the deserted station, she bit down hard on her lower lip to keep from breaking into tears.

She turned in a slow circle, taking in her environs. Across the street a big marquee on the corner told her that the huge parking lot served the Ventura County Fairgrounds. To her right, the road that ran alongside the railroad tracks dead-ended where the train had disappeared from view.

Moving on autopilot, she turned left and started walking toward the cross street at the end of the block. And as she walked, the thing that had been clamoring at her since the first inkling of consciousness—the truth she had been warding off—a truth that refused to be silenced—a truth from which she could no longer protect herself—hit her full bore.

Like some vile creature emerging from the muck it came at her, the mind-shattering question to which she had no answer.

Who am I?