
Chapter 1

At midnight she was inside the Easy Out Saloon, a redneck dive bar on The Purple Trail, the South Dixie highway. The Greyhound bus she arrived in idled outside in the gravel parking lot, accepting new passengers to trundle back northward. The saloon was a turnaround point for the bus line. There were ten minutes before another bus arrived and took her further south. She had a plan, a *crazy* plan, and she'd have to get to Key West to make it happen.

Outside the saloon's bathroom the sound system blasted "*Country Boy Can Survive*", and the raucous crowd shouted along. The last of the women who'd crowded the mirrors, cackling and putting on lipstick, were gone now, after filing out and dancing with their hands over their heads when Hank Williams, Jr. came on.

Alone at last.

She slipped out of the toilet stall and made sure there was no one else in any of the other stalls, pushing each door ajar. Alone for sure, she moved to a grubby mirror above one of the chipped sinks and took off her sunglasses.

The mirror reflected a disaster. It looked like she'd

murdered her father this afternoon, grabbed what she could from home and ran, got on a Greyhound and rode to Homestead, the end of mainland Florida, gateway to the Keys. There was a red blotch under her solid-blue eye and she raised her phone to photograph it.

Both eyes were cornsilk blue, but there was a vibrant golden wedge in her right pupil like a fat slice of pecan pie. Segmental heterochromia the doctors had called it. It was noticeable. Noticeable, and now, wanted for murder, it was identifying. It was the thing that might give her away, and rob her of her freedom.

In her dorm room up in Pennsylvania there was a plastic case, and in that case were contacts of uniform color. She hadn't worn them when she returned home to the mansion in Coral Gables—there was no way to anticipate how much she might have needed them. Sunglasses shielded her eyes while traveling south to the Florida Keys and when it was too dark to wear them—like now—she would have to keep her head down and never look anyone in the eye.

She moved quickly, unbuttoning her shirt and pulling it off her shoulders, turning three-quarter to the mirror and looking at her back. Across the ridges of her ribs there were cumulus clouds of purple bruising; overlapping blotches from where her father had hit her; a red bar raced over a shoulder blade, likely from a stair tread when he knocked her down the stone garden steps. It hurt to take a full breath. No ribs were broken, but she ached, and the ache was deep.

She documented the injuries with her phone's camera, rotating and clicking off pictures in the mirror.

If the police caught her, it might be a month from now when the bruises healed. It was a slim chance they'd believe the photos weren't doctored, and less chance a prosecutor wouldn't convince the judge to deem the photos inadmissible, but she *had* to take the pictures now. The photos would be time

and location stamped, and maybe, just maybe, a detail like that would keep her out of jail or off death row.

The man the police knew as Walton Grey was nothing like the man Nora James Grey and her siblings knew. The police would find Walton Grey face down on the glacier quartzite floor which Mother brow beat the import company to ship to Coral Gables all the way from Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella; above her father's body hung the enormous antique Lobmeyr chandelier Mother had outbid everyone else for at that estate auction for some deceased French actress in Marseilles; the teak wood and brass French doors opening to the teeming hydrangea gardens, the orange groves and the marble fountain; all the extravagant trappings of Walton Grey's work—twelve years as America's most lovable dad on the sitcom *Get On Outta Here!* making one-point-two million dollars per episode by the seventh season. The cops would see him on the floor, steak knife in his back, blood pooling and spreading in straight lines through the grout ditches, and they wouldn't see Walton Grey, master manipulator, cold-hearted narcissist and serial abuser, they'd see Cluffy Brubaker, blue collar good guy, family man and adoring TV husband.

That's the thing: the man Nora James Grey called her father was good friends with *all* the men who would be tasked with tracking her, capturing her, interrogating her, trying her, and punishing her.

There was no hope for fairness. No hope the truth would be heard.

She had to get out of the country.

Everyone would be looking for her to head north, thinking she'd return to college, that she'd be comfortable there and think she could hide. Maybe some college friends would help her. They'd be wrong about that. So, she was heading where they thought she wouldn't. Heading where she wasn't comfortable, where they'd think a spoiled little rich girl wouldn't go.

As she buttoned her shirt she could feel the tightness of her breath, and an ache lit up again in her back and neck and down one leg. It would have been better if she'd let Father do what he wanted to do. Throw her down the stairs, kick her, pull her up to stand by her hair. If she'd been smart she would have antagonized him. Spit in his eye and made him mark her face. Fresh marks that would show the harm he'd done.

But that would have required foresight. It would have been premeditated.

The last thing she'd intended to do today when she woke was end Walton Grey's life.

Out of the bathroom and into the country and western throng again, she weaved through the rowdy crowd and returned to the bar. A sign out front of the saloon when she'd come in read *No Bathrooms For Greyhound*, so once she entered she went straight to the bar, plopped down a twenty and ordered a double bourbon on ice. The bartender saw her coming back now and slid a glass to an empty spot at the busy bar, and Nora hopped up on a stool between two burly guys with cowboy hats while the drink was poured.

The bartender, a tough-looking woman with a tight Harley-Davidson tee-shirt, set the bottle back in its cradle and came back her way, watching her suspiciously. Nora dipped her head down, brought her glass closer and swirled the bourbon to splash over the frosty ice cubes and wet them down.

The woman still lingered, letting the other three bartenders pick up the slack, and Nora unclipped the sunglasses from her sweater's collar and pushed them on her face. Now she chanced a look and saw the bartender still watching.

What she'd first thought of as an expression of suspicion was clearer now as one of concern.

When the bartender saw her look up, she came closer, bar towel between two hands and putting her elbows on the bar. Over the music's din, the woman said, "You okay?"

Nora's nerves jangled. She felt obvious, noticed, and she knew that was the worst thing possible. She was being a girl who would be remembered. She nodded earnestly, raising her eyebrows above the sunglasses to show sincerity.

"Totally fine."

But the bartender's brow creased, a maternal gaze of compassion and care warming her eyes, luring Nora to claim the truth like this woman could be trusted. "You sure? You look like you seen trouble."

See, ma'am, I don't think I am okay, and yeah, I saw trouble... I murdered my father while my sister watched, and my sister ran off and I couldn't find her and she won't return my texts or my calls and so now on top of the grief and regret over murdering Walton Grey—yes, that Walton Grey—now I'm absolutely twisting with worry something has happened to the only person I care about left in the entire world.

Eden, where are you?

Did Eden run and hide, did she get on her own Greyhound and head for who-knows-where, just like her stupid big sister? Or did she hurt herself? Did she fall, did she end up in the ocean somehow? Did she knock herself unconscious and drown?

Or worse. Did she harm herself?

She upended the glass of bourbon and let it slide down her throat with a wicked cherry and turpentine blaze. The ice cubes rested on her nose and felt like they burned. Then she whacked the heavy glass down on the beaten bar and backhanded the wet chill from her lips.

"Totally fine," she said again to the bartender and pushed a big old smile on her face, the eyes hidden behind her Ray-

Bans showing nothing but pure pain and fear. “Couldn’t be better.”

Then she hopped off the stool and hauled out of there before the Greyhound left without her.

Walton Grey was dead and there was nothing Nora could do about it. She’d held his arm at the foot of the stone steps, fingers gripping his wrist and testing her father’s weak and dying pulse.

It was impossible to reverse what she’d done. Try as she might she could find no way to work out how she’d explain it to the police.

After she killed him, she played it out in her head how it would go: When she told the police it was self-defense, they’d say, “Self-defense? You stabbed your father in the back.” She’d say, “It was *still* self-defense, you don’t know what the man was like.”

Her legal team would surely try a stand-your-ground self-defense modifier. On the stand she would tell the jury the mansion in Coral Gables was her home and she had nowhere else to flee, and a wily prosecutor would say, “No, your *home* is the college dorm in Pennsylvania, an *expensive* college your father paid for and was proud you attended. You had a duty to retreat—if what you claim can be believed—and I’d say it was Walton Grey who should have stood *his* ground that fateful afternoon. Maybe that beloved man—a national *treasure*—would be alive if he did.”

In some interrogation room in Miami, they’d have her locked in a cinderblock room, a table, two chairs, everything she said and did being recorded. She’d ask, “Why won’t you believe me?”

“Your father donates to the South Florida PBA and plays

golf once a week with Sheriff Alcott,” the detective would say. “He and the Sheriff played eighteen holes at The Biltmore the day you murdered him.”

She’d tell the police her father killed her brother, and the cops would say, “Miss Grey, your brother died of an overdose.”

Eyes narrowed, she’d say, “And why do you think he did that, Detective?”

So she didn’t hang around. She ran. It was the only thing she could think to do.

Her roommate at Cambridge Prep was Lyndsey Oliver. Grades ten through twelve, they shared a room together at boarding school in Tampa. Formative years, for sure, and the two of them were the same: rich Florida girls with busy parents who sent them away from home for their education. The *difference* between them was still large despite all they had in common; Lyndsey’s parents loved her.

At almost two in the morning the Commander Restaurant was still lively. It had a working man’s coastal look with its steel corrugated roof over sun-beaten gray wood siding. No beach here, the place had a walk-around boardwalk a half-dozen feet above the water, dome lights on each of the wooden support posts. Loud classic rock thudded from within, and all the lights were on. No one sat at the tables outside, but inside there were people at the bar and some of the booths.

She was at the end of a quiet roadway on the south side of Bahama Village, not far from the *Southernmost Point of the Continental US*. Palm trees up above, black shapes against the navy blue starlit sky. The night was cool, but tempered by a warm breeze.

She’d ridden the Greyhound to Key Largo, then got on a

Key West Transit bus to take her further south. When she arrived in Bahama Village she thought she was hungry, so bought a Cuban sandwich and a coffee from a food truck. Despite the pang in her tight stomach, she couldn't take more than one bite. She drank the coffee.

Now she was tossing sandwich scraps to three eager pelicans bobbing in the water just down a gravel slope at the roadside's edge. Behind her was the Commodore Resort and Marina. Lindsey's parents owned it. Lyndsey said the Four Season Corporation put in an offer to buy it. For now the Oliver family still owned the restaurant and the sprawling luxury resort.

While Nora went north for college, Lyndsey went to Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton. It allowed her to come home on the weekends to work as maître d' at the Commander Restaurant. Despite the Olivers' familial wealth, they instilled in their daughter the virtue of service and labor.

A jealous pigeon watched the pelicans eat her sandwich, perched above on a power line. She tossed a mustard-soaked wad of pulled pork below the bird, not wanting it to feel left out. It didn't fly down just yet, though it quirked its head with excitement.

When her phone dinged she tossed away the last of her sandwich and stood, wiped her hands with wads of napkins, moving aside to see if there was any sign yet of Lyndsey coming out of the Commander.

She wasn't sure what she wanted from Lyndsey. Or didn't know at least how to make what she wanted possible. She needed a way to get *lost*. Disappear. Maybe Lyndsey had a spare room somewhere for her to hide. It'd be a bad idea to go up to Lyndsey's dorm in Boca, but maybe some kind of janitor closet in the Commodore Resort, somewhere to lay her head down until she could snag a boat ride out of the USA.

It was too much to ask.

And yet, Lyndsey had been accommodating.

The text was from Lyndsey, and it made her frown.

Lynzzz: *I can get you what you want but it has to be right now!!!*

She tucked her phone away and snuck in the shadows to the boardwalk that crossed the roadway, heading toward the restaurant's door.

Then she saw Lyndsey's familiar figure coming out the side door of the Commodore. Black skirt, white button-down shirt. Her wavy brown hair bounced on her shoulders, a little longer than the last time she saw her. She was carrying a garbage bag, but it didn't look like there was garbage in it. Whatever was in it was small and bunched up at the bottom, and there was a sagging bouquet of bunched-up plastic above Lynz's grip.

They came together fast at the hedge's corner and it startled Lyndsey, who scooted back, dress shoes scuffling on the gravel. "Crap, NJ," she gasped, "you scared the hell out of me." She lay a hand over her fast-beating heart and looked up to the night sky. It was good to see her.

She said, "Lynz, you were coming out to meet me, you knew—"

Now hushed and redirected, Lyndsey grabbed Nora's wrists and pulled her close, forcing direct eye contact. "What the hell is going on," she hissed, "are you okay?"

She *should* tell Lynz the truth. She wanted to. Wanted to babble it all out and thrust her life and future into someone else's hands. But Lyndsey didn't deserve that burden. She wouldn't give it to her. "The less I tell you the better."

Lynz was perplexed, shaking her head, jutting her face forward. "What do you mean the less you tell me? At least tell me you're okay."

"I'm definitely *not* okay," she said before catching herself and regretting it. *You need to keep your mouth shut.*

"Nora," Lyndsey sighed, bringing her in for a hug, the

light weight of whatever was in that plastic bag swinging against her butt. She hugged her friend hard.

She told her, "It's best if I don't say anything, Lynz. You'll find out soon enough."

Lyndsey whispered near her ear, "You're on the run?"

"I need your help," she whispered in return.

"I'll do whatever you need, NJ," Lynz said, and set Nora back with her hands on her shoulders. "Why are you on the run?"

When she saw the wet in Lynz's eyes, she realized her friend recognized the enormity of the situation. Lynz didn't know *what* it was, but she could sense the scale. If there was anyone who Nora could have trusted in this world with the truth about the much-adored Walton Grey, it was Lyndsey. Lyndsey knew the truth.

Nora brushed at her teary eyes and couldn't help sniffing. "It's really bad," she said.

"Is your sister okay? Did something happen to Eden?"

Nora shook her head no. "I think she's okay. I... But I don't know..."

"What else can I do for you, want me to check on her?"

"No, nothing," Nora said, palming her forehead. "I just wanted a place to hide for a few days, I need a way out and I—"

"I have a way out."

"A way out?"

Lynz nodded. "But you have to go *right* now, okay?"

Nora couldn't believe it could come together so quickly. She said, "To where, Mexico?"

"Mexico. There are two guys heading out on a dinghy, they're going to be leaving in about five minutes. I'm going to stall them, but I know they're headed to a bigger boat offshore and *it's* going to Mexico. And *it's* leaving tonight."

"Five minutes? I thought I would have a few days to put

some thoughts together and solidify a plan of action..." She'd never thought an escape route would pop up so fast.

Her first inkling had been to go to Mexico. And she wasn't going to go via Texas, so she'd come south. But her stomach turned over with uneasiness. This was an exigent departure and she hadn't enough time to work out if this was the *best* course of action.

But she said, "Okay, I'll go."

Lynz's lips pursed and she nodded once. The decision had been made. "This boat isn't at the marina. It's offshore. Come on, come here," Lynz said, and holding hands they trotted past the bobbing pelicans and down the gravel slope to stand at the shore. There was an island off to the left, but Lyndsey pointed to the right. There were two boats near to shore, and a larger one farther behind them. She said, "That one. You see that big boat out there, that yacht?"

"Yeah..."

"Here," Lynz said, presenting the black garbage bag. "I got a swimsuit for you from the gift shop. There's a towel in there too. Take your clothes off, get the swimsuit on, put your clothes in the bag then tie the bag up tight. You can swim out to that boat, but don't let them see you."

"What are you saying I'm going to do? *Swim* out there?"

"Yeah, and you can put your dry clothes back on from the bag when you get on board."

Their eyes met and held for a long moment of bewildered silence. She said, "This is *crazy*."

"I know it is, NJ, I know. But only *you* know if it's worth it." Lyndsey held her wrists again, her mouth scrunched to one side, brow deeply furrowed.

Only Nora knew if it was worth it. Lynz was right.

You wanted out of here and Lynz snagged you a standby ticket. Is it First Class? No, funny enough, you're kind of a stowaway.

“Shoot, wait, wait,” Lyndsey said now, jumping in place, eyes cast out to the water behind Nora. “That’s them, I think.”

“Them who?”

They both faced out to the water and now the soft drone of an outboard motor came into shore on the warm breeze. The black shape of a dinghy cut across the water, headed out to the yacht. It looked like there were two men on board the dinghy.

It was do or die.

What are you going to do, stay here and wait for the next ride out? What if it didn't come in time? What if the Sheriff's Department kicked in your janitor closet door inside the Commodore and snatched you up out of your hidey-hole, your dad's cop buddies looking for revenge?

Swim or go to jail, Nora James.

Then she was kicking off her sneakers quick, not even believing she was doing this. But this was what she came down to the Keys for, this was why she rode eight hours on a bus. Were there better circumstances in which to flee the country? Were there a multitude of options a young murderous woman could choose from to sneak into a foreign country?

Sweatshirt pulled overhead, she said, “Who are these guys?”

Lyndsey moved in to block the view in case someone strolled across the boardwalk and saw some college woman stripping down. “The yacht didn’t dock at the Commodore. It’s coming from up north, but there was a guy who came here from the yacht and now he’s heading back to the yacht with another guy who met him here at the Commodore. The one from the yacht’s a stocky kind of guy, the other one heading to the yacht, he’s in a suit. And he’s got this big pink cake box with him. My mom called over to me from the resort because the stocky one didn’t know where to put his dinghy—”

Arms folded up between her shoulder blades, adjusting the fit of the bikini bra, she said over her shoulder, “His what?”

“At the marina. His dinghy. He came to shore from the yacht in one, and he didn’t know where to park it. Then he had dinner with the guy in the suit. Guy in the suit is kind of really good-looking. And their waitress said he was a *really* good tipper.”

It sounded great. Maybe the guy would be sympathetic to *another* young girl tonight, one just trying to get by in this world, doing what she could to survive. And protect her sister.

With the bikini on now, the warm breeze didn’t feel so warm as she stuffed her sweatshirt, jeans, underthings, shoes, beanie, and even her sunglasses into the garbage bag. Lyndsey took the bag from her and tied a knot in the open end to keep her clothes dry. They walked to the water’s edge and it splashed cold around her bare feet and ankles, causing her to hug her own arms, and her teeth chattered in anticipation.

Lynz handed over the bag. “Can you do this?”

“I don’t know,” Nora said, looking out to the water and the yacht, so far away. It was a distance she could swim without a problem, but it was dark and scary and she was wanted for murder. Her life had changed forever this afternoon and she was going to have to hurry and get used to doing things she didn’t want to do. If she valued her freedom.

Lyndsey turned her around. “Do you *have* to do this?”

Nora nodded. “I *have* to do this.”

“I’m sorry, Nora. Whatever it is, I’m so, so sorry.”

Nora said, “I’m sorry to bring this to your door. To your family’s business.”

“NJ, I’d do anything for you, you know that. If you need anything, if I can help you at all, you let me know, okay?”

Tears welled in her own eyes. As bad as her life had been in the Grey home, there were warm spots. Her friends, her sister, her brother, her life at school. Even in death Walton Grey knew how to rob a person, strip away what made them whole so he could possess you as his own.

They stared again for another long and silent moment as urgent seconds ticked away. This was it. She was saying goodbye forever to the life she'd known. There was too much to say, so many things in her life unsaid, and now there was no time left. Her life was over the moment she swam out to stow away on a yacht headed to Mexico.

No, it was over the moment you stabbed your father in the back.

"I love you, Lynz," she said, "I can't ever repay you for all you've done for me."

Lynz's face scrunched up, trying not to cry. Her lips pursed and she folded her arms, tucking her hands in her armpits and blinking.

"It's just a swimsuit and a towel," she blubbered.

"Not just today. Every day."

Now Lynz gave in to the emotion and folded, tears streaming down her cheeks.

There was no more time. As she cried too, Nora turned her back on her friend and her life and trotted through the waves with the garbage bag swinging at her side. She dove headlong into the surf and swam toward the yacht.

It was a thousand times easier than she'd ever imagined.

Now she was safe and dry and hiding on board, blessing her friend Lynz for arranging an almost perfect escape.

The yacht had a swimming dock. She swam to the back of the yacht and hoisted herself on board. She encountered no one. The Scorpio dinghy was tied off at the rear—the two men had arrived on board and the yacht hadn't left right away. Hunched on that low swimming deck, she'd stripped naked—ready to jump back in the water if she was discovered—toweled off and put her clothes back on. The worst thing

was the littering, throwing overboard the garbage bag with the swimsuit and the towel.

Then she was crouching and sneaking, moving up from deck to deck, looking for a place to hide where she wouldn't be encountered. Inside the yacht was a no-go, but eventually she found herself on the topmost deck thinking she had nowhere left to look. The top deck, the highest tier on the multi-tier yacht, was a small space with a smoky glass alcove that led into the yacht, and a hot tub. She couldn't hide in the hot tub, which was covered, because it was likely to be used before they got to Mexico, but...

The hot tub was encircled by leather seating, and she lifted a seat to discover stowaway space. Meant for cushions and whatever marine bric-a-brac a yacht owner might accumulate, there was also enough space for a slender girl who needed to flee the law.

The space was tight but comfortable. Literally cushioned. She hid under the leather bench seating in a coffin-space stuffed with outdoor pillows. It was even warm. By the time the yacht's big motors fired up and she felt the sway as it got up to speed and headed into deeper water, all the chill from swimming and stripping had been heated away.

A peaceful feeling settled inside her and a glimmer of hope sparked. When she squeezed her phone out of her sweatshirt pocket and worked it up near her face, she almost expected to see a text from her sister Eden to further brighten this cozy spot in the worst day of her life.

But there was nothing. No word from Eden.

What had happened to her sister? Was she safe?

A slow grumble hummed below her and she cut off her phone and listened. It wasn't below. The grumble had emanated from this tier of the yacht. Her heart pounded and her ears strained to detect the slightest disturbance.

It was the coasting of a sliding glass door in its track, she

was sure of it. And it had been moved slowly. Carefully. As though someone was sneaking. Someone was anticipating the presence of another. She held her breath and listened.

Footsteps. Not just footsteps, but carefully placed ones. Whoever was up here sought not to be detected. What were the chances this yacht's trip would have two stowaways, what were the odds that—

She screeched and dropped her phone to the bottom of her storage space as the bench seat was yanked upward and the muzzle of a gun came in and stared her in the face. It had all happened so fast, in the blink of an eye, she was sure the Sheriff's Department had found her after all.

As she was yanked out of the warmth of her hiding spot and into the night air, her mind scrambled to make sense of how the cops would find her hiding here.

There were two large and muscular men. And they didn't shout they were Sheriff's Department, they didn't identify themselves at all. In fact, they said nothing, only made male grunts of exertion as they snatched her out of the seating and threw her face down on the deck. Someone got a knee in her back and she put out her hands to the side to show she surrendered. Her hands were yanked behind her back and zip-tied.

Three seconds was what it took for all her hopes of escape to be dashed and her journey to freedom to end.

But when they rolled her face-up, she saw these men were not cops at all.