

## Prologue Into the Blue

I stand on a massive mountain floating untethered on an endless ocean. Rising and falling. Hushed morning mist settles between sienna peaks and softens their sharp edges like a Chinese brush painting. Muted colors suggest moss and grass, willowing trees. Sky-blue morning glories twirl around and through whatever they touch.

Under the ground level surface, a transparent patch of pale turquoise reveals colorful sea-life swaying in a heartbeat rhythm. Drawn by the color and movement, I awkwardly descend and explore. A breeze touches me, ruffles my long, tie-dyed dress and short, silver streaked hair. It feels good on my skin. Like a human touch. Distracted by the sensation, I slip on a mossy rock and almost fall through into the blue, under the surface.

I scramble to higher ground.

A man calls to me from below, "Hey, Lauren Summerville, wanna play?"

He stands in a shadow, so I can't see his face. I hesitate. Maybe he'll touch me. Maybe even love me.

"Okay."

He strides toward the underground swirling blue. I'm afraid the surface layer is too thin and will crack and suck him under. I watch safely from above and wait. It doesn't take long.

I climb higher and rest for a moment. Rocks crumble under my bare feet. I reach up and cling to a protruding stone, but it's untrustworthy and loosens. I concentrate on remaining still and shift my weight to the other rocks supporting me. If I fall through into the blue and drown without ever truly loving, my life will be wasted.

I continue to ascend to a safer level, a peaceable kingdom, a plateau of muted colors and a hint of sandalwood incense. A few yards away, I see a gray silhouette of a woman's back and hear her ask a middle-aged man, "How do you see life here?"

His hair is wet, his cream-colored shirt and worn jeans cling to his body as if he's been swimming. He pushes his John Lennon-framed glasses higher on his nose, then sees me watching him and smiles. "I see it as intriguing."

"And the swirling blue under the surface?"

"Maybe less safe, but more profound."

The ocean behind him turns into a rippling deep turquoise silk. I reach out and hold the corners of the fabric and raise it higher and pull it lower in slow motion, then faster, freer. I stare at the reckless, undulating waves I'm creating. Is this real or my imagination?

## Crazy

Five cats in the upstairs apartment race over hardwood floors and bounce off walls and furniture like giant, frenzied squirrels. The chaotic madness is bad enough during the day, but in the middle of the night, eerie howls and raking claws tearing up wood and scratching litterbox sand could push someone, especially at my newly retired age, over the fine line between sanity and insanity.

On a sunny fall morning, a cool breeze drifts through my window and tickles my skin. I stare at my blank laptop screen and wonder who's hiding inside. Sunlight reflects part of my face, but most of it hides in shadows.

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I pause in the doorway of the closet-size laundry room in the renovated, four-apartment house in historic downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Used fabric softener sheets and lint from the free-floating dryer vent cover the concrete floor like a ratty carpet. My upstairs neighbor, old Mrs. Miller, stands in front of the washing machine like a faded doppelganger. Her over-flowing, plastic laundry basket sits by her feet.

With an indignant “Humph,” she reaches into the washer, grabs a handful of damp clothes, and drops them onto the rusted dryer top.

“Hey, those are mine,” I say. My voice sounds harsh even to me.

She flinches and turns with a frown, wrinkles her nose as if she smells something nasty.

“Who’re you?” she asks, her voice sharp, accusing.

“Lauren Summerville. I live below you. I’m here to put my clothes in the dryer.”

“Humph. Gunna take longer ta dry yer clothes than wash mine.”

My stomach tightens. I wave a whining mosquito away from my ear and watch it land in a thin layer of sweat in a crease of her neck. I start to smile, then edge in front of the washer and nudge her closer to the mildewed wall. Suppressing a sneer, I ask, “How are your cats?”

“What? Speak up.”

“*How are your cats?*”

“You don’t have to yell, ya know. Not deaf. They’re fine. ‘Cept one of ‘em’s throwin’ up hairballs all over the place.” She mimics the sound. “*Ack, ack, ack.* Mostly in the middle a’ the night. Have ta git outta bed and turn on lights so I don’t slip in the muck before I clean it up.”

Hmmm . . . I examine each piece of laundry on the dryer top for rust stains, shake it and toss it in the dryer. Then I shake and toss each piece from inside the washer. Eyes dig into the back of my neck like fire pokers. Mounting tension presses against my body. I’m ready to explode.

“Hurry up!” The sound pierces my ears. I twist around and thrust out my rigid fingers, grab her throat, squeeze. The lined face in front of me stares back, eyes wide in surprise, then panic, then—

“Hey. Why’d you write that?” The voice behind me sounds like my father. “You strangled her? What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know. It just happened. Characters decide how they’ll tell their own story.”

He squints his steel-gray eyes. “Characters aren’t real. They’re in your imagination. Delete it and start over.”

“But that’s what I did—deleted her, I mean.”

“No, delete the story. It’s terrible.”

I raise my gun and point it at his heart.

“Where’d the gun come from?” he says. “You need to have it appear earlier in the story. Make the reader wonder about it. This story is so amateur.”

“Then don’t read it. Write your own.”

“I’m not a writer. And neither are you. You sound like a nutcase.”

BANG.

The body falls to the floor with a thunk.

Dryer lint sucks up the expanding crimson puddle seeping from under his body.

Hmmm . . .

I watch the dryer door slam shut, the timer set for forty-five minutes. Thundering rumbles toss damp clothes in circles, around and around as the temperature rises.

“Oh my, sounds like the dryer’s alive.” This voice sounds worried, like my mother.

“Huh? Who are you? Were you hiding in my laptop, too?”

“In your what? Hiding from what?”

“From me. My mind,” I say.

“Why would I hide from your mind?”

“I’d hide from it if I were you. Who *are* you?”

“What? Speak up. Who are *you*?”

I hesitate. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a little bit crazy, dear, do you know that?” She shakes her head and lifts her foot before the red touches it. “Runs in the family.”

What? Is this real or did I make it up? What part is real? What part made up?

I dash out the door and slam it shut behind me. “I have to go to church now,” I add as the electronic combination door lock resets.

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I stand in the front pew, aisle seat of a gray stucco Episcopal church. Sunlight streams through stained-glass windows spilling color into the air. I sing lyrics displayed on a flat screen in front of the church and sway side to side in a gentle rhythm. The music has the power to enter my soul without my permission.

I raise my hand to my chest and continue to sing with the congregation, “Where can I go? Where can I run to?” Pressing my fingers over my heart, I close my mouth and read the words. “Where can I hide from the presence of the Lord? The Lord is near . . . near us at all times.” I slow my breathing, feel a chill and wrap my arms around myself like the woman next to me, but not because I’m cold. I need something to contain me. I quickly reach into my purse and remove a smooth, swirling blue turquoise stone with “love” carved into it, enclose it in my hand, shut my eyes and silently listen to the end of the song. “His Spirit is here. Receive Him now.”

My eyes widen, I breathe in, sucking light from the windows, leaving the congregation in hazy shadows. I hold myself tighter. I want to go to my island refuge, but it’s too late.

The service ends a moment later. I turn toward the aisle. A wall of people blocks my escape. I take a tentative step, feel a hand on my shoulder, hear a soft voice. “Are you okay?”

I freeze.

Brian?

I start to turn, but hear another voice, “Excuse me.” Bodies push me farther down the aisle toward the door. I glance back but I don’t see the man. Did I imagine him?

Outside, the returning sun spotlights me. Barely breathing, I raise a hand to shade my eyes while pressing my chest with the knuckles of my other hand wrapped around the warm stone. I bypass the priest. Can’t look at him. Don’t want him to look in my eyes and see . . . who I am . . . what I’ve done.

I hurry back to my apartment, slam and deadbolt the door behind me and lean against it.

Can’t do this.

Need to get away.

I close my eyes tight and hold my breath.