

# Chapter 1

**S**he woke up under a bright blue sky, yet it was snowing. She sat up, brushed the white flecks from her face, and discovered that they were not flakes of snow. They were tiny bits of paper floating down like confetti from a cloudless sky. Where, she wondered, was its source? The day was like a summer breeze. She inhaled its sweetness and it felt familiar. She didn't know why.

The flurry of paper snow gradually subsided. She watched the last of the tiny white bits melt into the concrete ground, shaved ice on a scorching summer day. But it wasn't hot at all. The temperature was just perfect. She looked around. The sidewalk on which she was sitting went farther than she could see. There was nothing on the horizon. Nothing. No street, no grass, no dirt. Just pavement. Where was she? She tried to remember. Where had she been before she awoke? She couldn't remember. In searching her thoughts, she realized something else. She couldn't remember who she was. Her heart raced with growing panic. What had happened to her?

"Hello?"

Her timid voice rang hollow in the silence.

Stay calm, she said to herself. She knew that it was the only way she could find answers. She took a deep breath to still the pounding inside her and rose to her feet. Dust covered her black dress pants and black sleeveless turtleneck. What is this dust? she wondered. She tried to remember something, anything and brushed off her clothing. She looked around again. Every direction looked the same. North, East, South and West embraced an identical blue sky and endless sidewalk.

She had no idea how old she was. What did she look like? She didn't have a purse, mirror, possessions or even shoes. She looked at her hands. They were young and groomed, her nails manicured and clean. She looked at the palms of her hands and noticed the web of intricate lines. Somehow, she knew they were roadways of her destiny. The lines were erratic, short and broken. Her hands spoke to her. If only she could decipher the language. They were trying to tell her who she was.

Frustrated, she closed her palms and looked at the sky. The sun seared the blue. The sounds of her breathing broke the suffocating silence. Was she dreaming? If this were a dream, she'd wake up soon. Dreams didn't last that long. This morsel of knowledge gave her comfort. Strange, she thought, an odd collection of memories lingered. Though she couldn't remember her name, she did remember trivial nonsense, recollections she wished she could put to better use. Perhaps it was part of a collective consciousness. This baffled her. Why could she remember random things, but couldn't recall one detail about yesterday?

She sighed, looked around again, not knowing what to do next. A song came to mind. She began humming it until the words tumbled out.

"Happy birthday to you..." She sang the song, though she didn't know to whom she was singing. The song was her companion. It filled the silence with hope. Maybe, eventually, she would remember other things too. "Happy birthday dear you, happy birthday to you..."

She picked a direction and walked. She sang as loud as she could. Her voice became her companion and sustained her courage.

On the horizon, a stream of purple smoke rose from the concrete to the sky and formed a giant cumulous cloud. Her walk became a trot as she neared the smoke, then she stopped. What if this meant danger? She watched the plume invade the blue sky with thick, dense fumes. But, what if it held an answer? She had no choice but to find out. A deep breath numbed her fears as she marched toward the smoke.

She was close enough now to see a man vigorously swatting the ground with his black coat. He wore a white, stained shirt. Blue suspenders held up his thick charcoal pants. He coughed several times, too distracted to notice her.

Once she was upon him, he looked up, startled.

“Who the hell are you?” His question was an assault.

“Who are you?” she asked in turn, feeling he somehow had invaded her space.

Deadlock.

“If you’re just here to confuse me more, then get the hell out of here,” he yelled.

“Confusing you? I’m sorry, but who are you?” she asked calmly.

He looked at her. She felt him examine her face, body and gestures. Why was this stranger so suspicious of her?

“What’s your name?” his gruff voice demanded. He coughed again. Soot covered his face and marked his hands and clothing, as if he had just emerged from a fire.

She didn’t know how to respond. She looked into his red-rimmed eyes and found them soulful, deep, yet filled with an unconcealed fear. Was it possible that he was afraid of her?

“I don’t know who I am.” The statement burst out of her.

He looked at her in disbelief and then looked at the splattered dark area on the concrete. He bent down to touch the charred cement and sampled the black embers between his fingertips.

“Did you see it too?”

“I saw the smoke. I followed the smoke here,” she answered his interrogation.

He nodded, then looked up at her with piercing eyes that assessed her credibility and trustworthiness.

“You didn’t see her then.”

“Who?”

“Her. The woman with scarves.”

“No. I saw no one but you.”

The man remained quiet. She knew he had seen something that unnerved him, but was too macho to admit it. Could he be crazy? Was she in danger? She was lost. That didn’t mean she should trust a complete stranger.

“What’s your name? Tell me your name,” she insisted.

The man looked at her, rose to his feet and brushed the embers from his hands.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, barely looking at her.

She was secretly delighted in his response and felt a kinship. They were both in the same predicament. She noticed his feet. “No shoes either?”

He looked down and wiggled the toes of his bare feet.

“Look, me too.” She paused and looked into the stranger’s hazel eyes. “I don’t know how I got here.”

“You don’t?”

“I just woke up and started to walk. That’s when I found you.” She saw his face relax when he sighed, almost relieved.

“Me too,” he said. “I don’t remember anything either.”

She looked at the sky and saw the smoke was gone without a trace.

“What happened to you? Do you know?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. There was rubble and a building collapsing. Chunks of broken concrete, dangling wires and iron beams. I survived

something. I don't know what. Then it was gone. Poof. Just like that. Nothing left. I can't explain. I don't know."

"Oh."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I'm just trying to figure this out too, that's all." She noted his outfit. "Are you a fireman?"

"A fireman?" For the first time, he noticed his clothing.

"You look like a fireman, the way you're dressed. And, you were putting out a fire."

He shrugged, "Maybe. I don't know."

He scanned his surroundings again then looked back at her.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"You won't believe me."

"Tell me."

"I saw something strange, that's all."

"In the smoke?"

"It fell from the sky and exploded on impact into a cloud, a purple cloud. That's when I saw her."

"Who?"

He shook his head.

"What fell from the sky? What happened?"

"It's too crazy. I can't tell you. This is crazy. Maybe I'm hallucinating. Hell, I don't even know if you're real."

He nervously ran his fingers through his disheveled black hair and turned to look at the horizon behind him.

"Where are we? What kind of damn God-forbidden hell are we in?"

Silence.

She observed him. He was young, probably under thirty-five with a stocky, sturdy build and a strong, solid body. He had hazel eyes, abundant eyebrows and a face etched with lines far beyond his years. She knew he had seen a lot in his lifetime.

"Firemen are heroes," she said. "I remember that much."

He turned to her and listened.

“And since it looks like you and I are the only ones here, I have to call you something.”

“You want to call me something? Is it a four letter word?”

She laughed. “It is.”

“Good. I feel like a four letter word.”

“You look like a ‘Hero.’ Okay if I call you that?”

“Hero?” He mulled it over. “Heeeerrrrro. Hero. I like that. Herooooo.”

“Okay, Heroooo. What do we do now?”

“Wait. You should have a name too. How about...”

“What? What are you thinking?”

“Hmmm,” he searched the sky for a clue.

She noted the laugh lines around his mouth. He had a good sense of humor. What was he like when he wasn’t fighting fires? Was he the life of the party? A good-time Charley? A big flirt?

“Mary? Susan? Nah. Blue? Nah. You’re definitely not blue.”

“Nice try. You get a gold star for the last one.”

“Thank you. You remember lots of stuff.”

“Just junk.”

He paused a moment. “You know something? You’re very pretty.”

“I am?”

“Yeah. You got pretty eyes.”

“I do?”

“Maybe I will just call you Pretty. Pretty One.”

“Pretty One. Nice.”

“Pretty One,” he repeated. “I like it.”

She smiled. She liked it too.

Together they walked in a direction that didn’t have any particular appeal. All directions looked the same. Hero picked south. He said it

meant warmth and he liked the heat. She let him have the pick of directions because she didn't really care which way they went. There was no way of knowing which horizon held what clues.

As they walked, she noticed her feet were not bothered by the rough texture of the cement, nor did she feel tired, hungry or thirsty. She was comfortable just as she was. There was little conversation between them. There was no need for any discussion since they were each lost in their own thoughts. She knew they were wondering about the same things; desperately sifting through memories for answers.

Images flashed in her mind. Sunflowers and shimmering glass. Green grass framing a black pavement. Cardboard boxes. Traffic lights. Cold, steel train doors.

"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind," Hero blurted out and broke her trance.

"What was that?"

"That's what she said, 'An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.'"

"Who said that?"

"The woman with the scarves. After she told me that, she blew up."

"She blew up? As in exploded?"

"Well, not exactly exploded. She just turned into a ball of fire. Listen to me. That sounds crazy. Am I crazy?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

Maybe he was a madman, she thought to herself. But, her heart told her something different. She knew he was telling the truth, his truth, anyway.

"What did she look like? This ball of fire?"

"Well, she looked kind of like a genie. You know, like a genie in a bottle with fancy scarves. Purple ones. And pink sequins with sparkly crap. She had these big eyelashes. And was in a bikini."

"A bikini?"

"Yeah, you know, with big golden cones over here." He pointed at his chest.

“Big golden cones? Okay.”

“Yeah. But then again, I’m crazy.”

“I think you were having a male fantasy.”

“But get this. She had these eyes, big and purple.”

“Purple?”

“Yeah, she was hot.”

“Hot? I’m sure she was.”

“No, hot. As in flame hot. Broiling hot. Oven hot. Sun h—”

“Okay, I got it.”

“She fell from the sky, but didn’t look like a woman at first. She was a blur, just a purple and red blur. Disgusting. I thought, bomb. Then, there she was. A bombshell.”

“Clever.”

Pretty One felt jealous. Why? She didn’t know him. She just met him.

“Then what happened?”

“She belly-danced her way to me and looked at me.”

Pretty One rolled her eyes. “Oh please. She belly-danced her way to you? You sure you weren’t dreaming?”

“Really. I swear. That’s what I saw. You don’t believe me?”

She sighed. “Go on.”

“Well, then she spoke in a really sexy voice and said that thing. That thing I told you.”

“Then what?”

“Then she exploded into flames, and I had to put her out. I mean it out. That’s when the rubble I thought I came out from, disappeared. Then, you showed up. Weird, huh?”

“Weird, yes. What were you drinking?”

“See, I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“I do. I think. It’s strange that’s all.”

“No kidding. What do you think it means?”

“What means? The woman in a bikini with golden cones?”

“No, the thing she said, the eye for an eye thing.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Silence. She was thinking.

“Do you believe me or do you think I’m nuts?”

“I have to believe you.”

“Why? I’m having a hard time with it myself. Why would you believe me?”

“I have no other choice. If we have only each other, then who else am I going to trust? I’ll have to believe you, if I want to trust you.”

“You’re smart. You’re not only pretty, but you’re smart too.”

“Thanks. It’s just logical.”

“So, tell me what you think. What do you think it means?”

Pretty One gave it some thought as she surveyed her surroundings. The horizon was still bare, not giving up anything. The sun’s golden late afternoon light painted the concrete. They were heading into the night. At least that made sense.

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind means that getting even can only make matters worse.”

“I’m not getting even with anybody. I’m just looking to get the hell home.”

“Maybe the message is not for you. It’s for you to tell somebody else.” He stopped and looked directly into her eyes. “You amaze me.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re so wise. You look too young to be so wise. Who are you?”

“I told you, I don’t know,” she said and lingered on the clue he gave her.

“How young am I?”

“I don’t know, twenty-something? Thirty? But you sound wiser than your age.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They continued walking, each quietly sorting through their thoughts. Here they were, she assessed. Two lost souls without an identity stranded in a deserted place they could hardly call an island. They seemed to have so much in common, yet nothing. She glanced at him, his eyes lost in some far-away path. What was this man like? Was he married? Single? What did he do when he wasn't fighting fires? Did someone somewhere miss him dearly?

Who was her traveling companion? And, who was she? Where did she live? Did someone somewhere miss her? Did she have a family? A child? A dog? How did she grow up? What did she do for fun? What was her favorite food?

She was a mystery to herself. She observed a stranger's life, yet she was the stranger. Then, she thought of it in a different way. She had the rare opportunity of getting to know herself as if she were another person. Now, she had the ability to experience things objectively, without association or baggage. She was a being, without a history, a name or attachments. She was creating new experiences and seeing a world with fresh eyes. She was reborn as a free entity. Maybe this was really her lucky day.

She walked beside her new friend as day melted into night, grateful for the company. The shuffling of their feet tapped an impression in the silence—a duet into the unknown.