



## CHAPTER I

Most people think running away is hard.

It isn't.

My mom ran away from everything her whole life, dragging me with her, showing me how it was done. I was in awe of her elegant technique: a slight of hand that dipped into someone's wallet for a little stash, a lie to reassure a man of her undying love right up until she left, a light step, an open door. Done. Gone. Travel light. Turn on a dime. Smile, smile, smile because the next opportunity is in front of you. Grab it. Milk it. Start over again when it goes south or you get bored.

Yes, my mom was a good teacher and I was a fast learner. I learned that if I didn't keep up I would be left behind. That actually wouldn't have been too bad if I had known we weren't running toward anything. We weren't. Linda wouldn't have known a good place if we were sitting in the middle of it and that was sad. I knew

when were in a good place but that was sad, too, because I also knew we wouldn't stay long.

My mother is tall and beautiful, cool and calculating. I don't think she has a heart. She is also light skinned and voluptuous. I am shorter than she and narrower. I have a heart but I try to keep out of my equations. Easier said than done sometimes. My skin is darker than hers. Our names are different. She was Linda Rayburn when I last saw her in court. I assume that's still her name, but I wouldn't bet on it. I have always been Hannah Sheraton. I was sixteen when my mom went to prison and I was no innocent. I knew a lot. Like, I knew that Linda was mostly running away from herself. That sounds kind of arrogant since I'm a kid and people always say 'what do kids know?'. Those people would be surprised what kids know, but I know more than most because I had time tons of time to think. There was time when I was left alone in those apartments while Linda went catting, when I sat in corners of strange houses and watched Linda work on whatever new man she was hooking up with, when I sat in a jail cell. The only time I stopped thinking was when my mom looked like she was trying to figure out if she should just run away from me, too. That look made my little-girl-brain go blank. My teenage brain knew that look meant my mother was having a moment of honesty about who she was and how she treated me. She knew she should make amends. She never did, of course, because honesty is like a penny, shiny and tempting but, in the end, easily discarded because, in the end, it doesn't buy you much. So, she'd look away and it was all about her again. Even when she killed the old judge and pointed the finger at me, her own daughter, it was never about me.

I never told her that I knew she used up all her love on herself and there wasn't any left over for me. Even if I had told her, she wouldn't have heard because Linda thought she was always right. Her survival instinct was that strong. These are family traits: being right and wanting to survive. I think I'm right all the time, too, even when I'm not. Maybe especially when I'm not because believing that I'm right is where I can find some courage. This time we were both right. I was right about the fact that we had to run away and she was right that it wasn't all that hard. It's staying gone that sucks especially because I'm gone and running with Billy Zuni. No, I take that back. I'm running for him. If it weren't for me, he wouldn't be alive. I don't think either of us would be.

So here we are.

We've traveled through Oregon and Washington. We turned left at the Canadian border and made our way to Alaska on a fishing boat. I'll never eat sushi again after that; I still smell fish on us. When I asked for the jobs, I thought the captain would laugh us off but he just asked if we got seasick. He wasn't even curious about how old we were or why we looked half starved. He just grunted and showed us what was what. We never worked so hard in our lives, me in the galley and Billy hauling nets before we made land. Friggin' Alaska, for God's sake. When we got off that boat and Billy asked:

"Where do we go now?"

*Home.*

That's I wanted to say. Then I wanted to say:

*How should I know?*

I almost said that because I was scared, and I'm just a kid, and it was time for him to have some ideas. I didn't say that, of course. How could I? Billy didn't have a home to go to. His sister was dead and there was a crazy guy who wanted to kill him to make up for Billy's great-grandfather killing somebody fifty years ago. That was beyond lame. Lamer than what my mother did to me, so I just shut up. I hitched my pack and he hitched his and we started walking again. I was thinking again mainly because I can't seem to stop doing that, and this time I was thinking about what happened in California.

No matter where we sleep - in a doorway, a flophouse, a farmhouse or a ditch - I dream about Gjergy Isai. The last time we saw him was on that dock in Malibu, determined to kill Billy, ready to take me out if I got in the way. But it was Josie who got in the way and I dream Gjery Isai killed her. In my mind's eye I see her floating in the ocean, tall and lean, her arms out like she's been crucified face down. The water isn't crazy banging like it was the night it had hold of Billy. The sea Josie floats in is crystal blue and still like a lake. If there were waves to wash her toward shore, I would go into them and pull her out even if it meant me dying. That's how much I love her. I would have done it to pay her back for all the right things she's ever done even when she was afraid. But in my dream she just floats away. Archer isn't there to say goodbye. I'm sorry he isn't because I came to like him a lot. I don't know if Max is there in my dream. He's probably sleeping in his doggie bed in Josie's house. That's cool. Sometimes all you need is just one person to be there for the big stuff like dying.

Luckily, I know positively that the man from Albania didn't kill her. If Josie

were dead, Faye would have erased the message on the office answering machine and she didn't. I've heard it. Now, I need to hear it again even though making a call isn't the wisest thing to do at the moment. Before Billy can stop me, I detour to the ancient phone booth standing like a specter in the shadows of the truck stop store. The glass is so dirty I don't want to touch it, but I fold back the door, get in and slam it shut just as I hear Billy call:

"Hannah. We don't have time. Come on, Hannah!"

I stand there with my back to him, pretending not to hear, looking at the phone book hanging in shreds from a black chain. I can't seem to take my eyes off it. All those pages with names and numbers that mean nothing now. Cold seeps through a crack in the glass but the light turned on when I shut the door so that makes me feel better. I never did need more than a little bit of light to make me feel safe.

Finally, I shake my head and get on with it. It doesn't take long to figure out how this thing works, so I dig in the back pocket of my jeans and come up with two quarters, drop them in, and pick up the clunky black receiver. Amazingly, I get a recording. The box wants two more quarters. Luckily, I have them. I know Billy has followed me because he follows me everywhere, but I don't turn around. If I do, I'll see the look on his face, the one that says it's not a good idea to tempt fate, take a risk, put yourself out there. He's right. That's why I'm calling late when Josie won't be there. If I hear her real voice, I'll want to go home so bad I might even leave Billy. That's what he's really afraid of. I split the difference and listen to her message. Then I leave one of my own.

"We're still okay. We'll be okay."

I don't say I miss her, even though I want her to know that. I don't say I am afraid, because I know she suspects it. I hold the phone to my ear long after the machine on the other end beeps that my time is up. Billy knocks on the door, but I can't seem to let go of the receiver. That top part is suctioned over my ear, held close the way a baby holds a blanket to its face to comfort itself to sleep. I press that big black thing to my ear as if it has the power to suck me in, and I'll travel over wires and across the states I've run through and land in Faye's office or maybe even my own bed in Josie's house.

When Billy moves into my line of sight, I can't pretend anymore. There is no magic. I don't change into anything in that phone booth. I don't suddenly transform into a babe with big boobs in a skin-tight costume. There is no big red S on a blue jumpsuit for me. I'm sure not a super hero; I'm just Billy's hero.

I hang up, put my hands on that glass doors but for the first time since all this started I can't seem to move. I am only sixteen. I am not wise beyond my years. I am not an old soul. I'm not strong just because my shoulders are broad and my eyes are sharp. Adults just assume I am all of those things because I am silent and when I'm not I talk tough sometimes. They mistake the deep hurt they see in my eyes for knowledge and the way I dress as a mark of sophistication. Adults want me to be wise so they don't have to be; they want me to be self-sufficient so they don't have to be responsible for me. I have spent years trying to tell them that the way I look is not what I am; the way I talk isn't what I know.

*I wish someone understood that.*

I look up through my lashes at Billy and my shoulders fall a little.

*I guess it's enough that I know what I know.*

I know that if I give up and we go back to Hermosa Beach Billy will go into foster care. He doesn't deserve that. If I leave him alone, he'll make a mistake and someone will kill him. He sure doesn't deserve that. If we keep running, there is a chance we'll be safe. I think we both deserve a shot at that.

"Are you coming?" he asks again.

The glass muffles his voice, his nose is red and his cheeks are white with the cold. He keeps moving because he is anxious when I am gone from him too long even if all that is between us is dirty glass. He is anxious because he's always been good at reading signs and not coming out of that little booth is a sign of something that isn't good. My fingers drum against the glass - once, twice, three times. I stop doing this almost as soon as I start. Touching and counting were things the old Hannah did. The new one doesn't have time to fret and fumble and the touching never really accomplished anything anyway. There aren't any doors for me to guard any more. Everyone who has come into my life has left it - except for Billy. I don't count the seconds until those people return. They never will. Linda is in jail and has no use for me; Josie is in Hermosa with Archer and they are waiting. It's me; I'm the one who will have to go back. I just won't go back now.

"Yeah. I'm coming."

I push open the door but it only goes so far because it is old and in disrepair. I have to squeeze out. In that one second when I am caught half in and half out of this little box, while the light flickers off and on leaving me half in the light and

drenching me in the dark, I think of all the things I want.

I want to put my fist through the glass booth, I want to rip the phone off its cord, I want to scream for someone to come help me. Me. Hannah Sheraton.

*I'm only sixteen.*

I want to see Hermosa Beach again.

I want to take Max for a walk.

*I'm a teenager.*

I want to paint.

I want my hair to be long again.

I want to see Josie and Archer and Faye.

*I am frightened.*

I want. . .

"Hannah, what are you waiting for?"

Billy bounces from one foot to the other. His arms wrap around himself.

When I left Josie's house I packed my duffle: a sweater, a hoodie, t-shirts, an extra pair of jeans, food and the money I had made selling my paintings. That money lasted us a good long while. I thought we'd replenish the stash with the gig on the fishing boat but the captain screwed us. He said we ate up our wages. He said our wages paid our passage.

What were we going to do?

Call the cops?

When we left Hermosa the idea was to get Billy somewhere safe until the adults figured things out. I didn't think it would take this long or that we would have



to go this far. So, I'll admit it, I wasn't right about what was going to happen. In fact, I was majorly wrong.

Then I thought we were safe in Oregon but I heard about the big man looking for us and I figured it was Gjergy Isai. How he found us would always be a mystery but found us he had. We ran again before we laid eyes on him in that mountain town. We ran with all we had and at that point we didn't have much. We still don't.

"You need warmer clothes. You need different shoes."

I say this to Billy when I finally push myself out of the telephone booth instead of back in. I stick my hands in the pockets of my jacket. Billy has never held my hand, but I want to make sure he doesn't try. I don't think I could take it. There has to be a stronger one, and I don't trust him to be it.

"Yeah, who knew Alaska would be so cold."

He laughs at his own joke and that kind of ticks me off. It makes me mad that he doesn't complain. I seem to be mad a lot and mostly I'm sorry for it, so I don't say anything. Billy touches my shoulder and I flinch. He seems sad when he says:

"We have to go, Hannah. He's not going to wait much longer."

Billy motions toward a bunch of trucks pulled up near the giant gas tanks. Two of the operators are in the shop having coffee. Billy caught the third guy in the john at the back of the building and hit him up for a ride while they stood side-by-side peeing. I can't decide if I don't like the looks of him or I'm just not happy that Billy didn't consult with me before arranging this, but there it is and I am not happy. Still, we can't sleep in the open until we get some sleeping bags. Even then, the cold is scary. I don't think sleeping bags will be enough to keep us from freezing to death

in another few weeks. We need so much and we have so little money left.

"Okay. You're right." I say this knowing we don't have a choice.

It will be warm in the truck and that man is going to a place nobody's ever heard of which is exactly where we want to be. I lean back into the booth and put my fingers in the little hole where it says *change*. I come up empty. I'm not ashamed for trying. A little good fortune can go a long way.

"We're coming." Billy waves at the trucker. Even from this distance I see him glower. We are holding him up.

"I've got to use the bathroom," I say.

I duck off into the little store while Billy slaps himself warm and calls to the driver, begging him to hold up. Whoever built the place was gracious and put the ladies room inside instead of out. I don't really have to go so I am in and out in five. I had something else to do.

"Here."

I give Billy a puffy fleece jacket that is the most god-awful screaming yellow color. It was the only thing the store had in his size. Billy takes it like I just handed him the Golden Fleece. He wants it in the worst way but says:

"I'm taking it back. We need the money."

I set my jaw, rip off the tags, tear them into little pieces, and toss them.

"Now you can't. Come on."

I grab my duffle and walk away from the light, through the shadows and toward a puddle of weaker light that shines down from a bare bulb strung on an old pole near the tanks. The bearded guy who's going to give us a hitch wears a hat with

earflaps. It takes a certain kind of guy to wear a hat like that the right way. It's not him. It's only six o'clock and yet it seems as dark as midnight. They say Alaska winters are perpetual night. It's October and Billy will be eighteen in June so we just have to wait out the dark until then. That will solve half of our problems. Hopefully, someone will have solved the other half by then and do something about the man named Gjergy Isai who came from Albania just to kill Billy.

The next thing I know, Billy is beside me. The screaming yellow fleece jacket is even grosser when it's on him, but he's got it zipped up to his chin, his hands are buried in his pockets, and he is grinning. There are times I'm happy to be with him. He is so grateful for every little thing - even an ugly jacket.

I flattened my gaze and forget Billy when I see that the guy standing beside the cab of the truck is watching us. Only he's not really watching us, he's watching me. I've seen too many men look at my mother like that, and I know it's not nice. The good news is that I'm not my mother. I stop in front of him. He puts his hand on the door handle.

"There's only room for one up front." His voice is like his beard, stubbly, sketchy and unattractive.

"It's okay. You ride up front, Han. . ." Billy begins to talk but I cut him off. He's so clueless.

"We'll both go in back."

I cut my eyes to the container he's hauling on the flatbed. It reminds me of the place Josie was imprisoned. A tremor runs through me. I flash on doors shutting, chains threading through handles, rotten air, isolation, death or madness waiting,

already comfortable in the cave like corners of that metal box. No one can hear you cry in a place like that. So much can happen when you're locked away. People can forget you ever existed. I look back at the driver. He is just a stupid man, not a maniac. I've known a lot of maniacs. Not everyone is a friggin' maniac. I have to remember that.

"We'll ride back there." It sounds as if my mind is made up even though I don't feel so sure about any of this. I turn my eyes on him, and I know that my stare shames him because of what he was thinking.

"Suit yourself."

He scowls and leads the way to the back. As he passes, I smell beer on his breath. I don't like that but our choices are limited. Right now hitching a ride looks like the best option. When we get to the rear he unlocks the container and pushes one tall door back. The metal groans and the inside yawns like the passage way to hell. I feel sick instantly, but I toss the duffle in then grab the side of the door and put one foot up. If I go in fast, it won't be so scary. The guy in the dork hat puts his hands on my butt and his touch is like a cattle prod. I am electrified. I jump down and square off.

"Don't touch me," I growl.

I've got a fist up and my feet planted like I could really take him on. Billy isn't so sure I won't try so he puts his arm between us. I can feel his whole being begging me not to make trouble. He hates trouble and so do I, but I didn't start it and Billy should have said something. He should have done something so I wouldn't have to. Then again, he's Billy. He's done as much as his good nature will allow. For a minute

it's pretty tense. Finally, the driver shakes his head. He spits on the ground.

"I was helping, you little black bitch."

I ignore the slur. It could have been worse. He could have left us there. Instead, he waits until I climb in and Billy goes in after me. We stand together, seeing our breath in the grey of the interior. The thing is half filled with boxes that smell of something but it isn't food. The metal floor is buckled and pops under our weight as we shift to get the feel of our surroundings. I look back at the driver. I start to say thanks to make up some but the door slams just then. It rattles my teeth and chills me to the core. I thought I knew what dark was but until that minute I didn't have a clue how black the world could really be.

When I hear the latches bang and ratchet and a chain run its course, my anxiety is instantaneous. It is the crazy-making itch of uncertainty, of fear, of despair and I need a razor blade in the worst way. I could slice away it all away, all these feelings that seize my gut before working up to my chest, my heart, my lungs. It is a tight and nasty thing like the way my mother took hold of my shoulders before giving me a good shake, her face close to mine as she spit out words that made no sense except to her.

*My last chance to have something good . . . you're a good girl*

*He needs to like you . . . men don't want kids*

*How can I take care of us . . . I'm saddled with you*

Her logic was always flawed and she always laid blame at my feet. Funny I should think of that now when there was so much else to think about. I shake my head. The scars on my arms swell as if blood is pumping through them but that's

impossible. They are scars; thick tissue; none of them are new. They are hard as roots bound too long in a small pot. There is no life in that ugly little map of mutilations on my forearms but the fear is alive, writhing and deeper than ever. Even with a razor blade, I doubt I could cut it away forever so the best thing to do is the next best thing.

I push out a hand, my fingers crunch into my palm. My nails are short now but they still bite into my skin as they keep time with the numbers flashing behind my eyes. I am so afraid I can't speak. Funny that a slamming door can do me in when Gjergy Isai and the old judge, Fritz Rayburn, should have been far more frightening. Maybe they weren't scary because I knew what I was up against. I could see them coming. Evil could hide in this airless, vacuum of dark only making itself known when it was right on top of me. Suddenly, Billy is beside me, a young man wrapped in a ball of yellow fleece. He has my hand. I have his. I'm not angry that he's done this. Not this time.

"It's okay. Dude, it's okay."

I laugh because he calls me dude, because he comforts me in the same voice he uses to talk about everything. That voice is touched with awe and sweet faith. Some things never change. Even though we can't see each other, I know he's smiling because my laugh is a relief to him. It means I am not mad at him and I am okay. As long as I'm okay, so is he.

The truck starts up, a deep rumble of an engine that sounds out of whack. We lose our balance, drop to our knees and crawl to the side of the container. The floor pops under us like metallic bubble wrap. We find an alcove in the stack of

boxes. The cardboard will steady us and help warm us. I wish there were boxes up against the metal frame in our little space but you can't have everything. The container lurches and shakes a little. The cargo is strapped; it's the truck that is unsteady. I wonder if the bumper has one of those 'how am I driving?' stickers on the back and if someone will report this guy. I hope not because we are on the road again and we need to get to the end of the world and maybe then some. I don't know where the end of the world is, but I think we're pretty close to it in Alaska.

I am so deep in thought that I jump when Billy touches my head. Being touched in the dark like that always feels creepy. Someday, maybe, there will be someone I love and I'll welcome the touch that comes out of nowhere, but now I duck away. Billy doesn't take offense; he just stays on his own track.

"Cutting your hair was massive, Hannah. Really. It was awesome. It's like a symbol, huh? You just cut yourself off from everything for me. I get it. So, like, I'm grateful, Hannah."

I smile but only because Billy can't see me. I've heard this from him before. What he really means is that he misses the Hannah he knew. The one with style, with a diamond pierced through her nose and a stutter of gold rings through her ears. He doesn't know this Hannah, the girl with the halo of kink and curls, dyed blond with a box of Clairol swiped from a sale table in front of a beauty supply shop back in Sanger. It was too dangerous to go in to pay for it when we were that close to home. I left a few dollars. I hope the girl from the counter found it. I touch the scrub of my hair and say:

"Yeah."

I don't point out that we've both changed. Billy's hair has grown past his shoulders and he parts it in the middle or pulls it back in a ponytail. It is beautiful, straight and sandy brown instead of beach-bleached white. I don't think he misses the beach after what he's been through but, strangely, I do. All this happened just as I'd made my peace with the ocean and acknowledged the beauty of it. It was never the ocean that bugged me anyway; it was the people living near it who made me crazy. They were so happy. I've never been real comfortable with happy, especially when it skims the top of person, never sinking any further than the smile, the eyes. Kind of like the froth on a latte.

My thoughts wander back to Hermosa Beach; always Hermosa. I think of Max. He is old. He might not be there when I get back and the thought of that brings hot tears to my eyes. I'm more angry than sad. I know life isn't fair but I'm so done with that. It's time for life to be gloriously fair or to at least give me and Billy an honest-to-god break. I put my head back against the metal wall. I lean away from Billy against the boxes and close my eyes.

"We should try to get some rest," I say, but Billy is on his own trajectory and doesn't realize that I need to regroup.

"You look more like a black chick now." I hear him settling in against the boxes on his side. He sounds sleepy, but he keeps talking. I found that out about him early. He talks himself to sleep. He's doing it now. "Even if your hair's blond, you still look like a black chic. Before you looked Indian. From India, you know?"

"Yeah. I know," I mutter.

He's not talking about what I look like, he's really wondering if I will stay



with him. I don't have the energy to reassure him when he never can be reassured. That's wise on his part. I can't be truly honest because I don't know if some of my mother is in me - the part that eventually bolts for greener pastures.

"Do you miss it, Hannah?" he asks dreamily. "Your hair? Do you miss it?"

I shake my head. He can't see that and I doubt he really expected an answer. Still, I consider the question. If I wasn't so tired, I would give him my answer. The answer is this: No, I don't miss my hair as much as I miss what might have been if I was still in Hermosa with Josie.

"You okay, Hannah?"

"I'm good. It's nice to ride. I was tired of walking. I didn't like the boat."

"It's nice to ride." Billy echoes me. Then there's a minute and he adds, "Yeah, you look more like a black chic now."

Billy Zuni stops talking and he sleeps. My eyes are open and I stare straight ahead. His words echo in my head. Black chick. That's what I am. It seems that I am getting darker by the minute but black has nothing to do with the color of my skin and everything to do with my heart and my mind.

I am afraid of myself just a little bit.

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