

Serenity

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Chapter 1

Sunlight slanted through the heavily barred windows and fell into the office, leaving a shaft filled with dancing dust particles hanging just above Karl Clark's desk.

'So what you are saying,' said the head of the prison. 'Is that we have no other option, we have to let her go.' His voice was dry, irritated.

'Yes sir. She has served her full sentence with no time off. As from today, she is free to go. No parole, no conditions, nothing. If she asks for help to get back on her feet, we are obliged to give it to her. I doubt she will ask though.'

The speaker was Bill Jackson, head of the legal department for Hacksville prison. The head of the prison, Karl Clark, looked at him and sighed.

'Bill, I know this woman killed at least five of her fellow inmates.' He raised his hand before Bill could object. 'Yes, I also know there is no evidence, but that does not change the facts, she killed her fellow inmates. She is deranged and she is dangerous, yet you want me to let her go, let her walk out of the front door and disappear into society?'

Bill coughed. He felt uncomfortable having this conversation with the head of the prison, but his job was to follow protocol, to allow the law to run its course, not to indulge a man who thought he had the right to imprison people because he felt it was the right thing to do.

'You have to let her go Karl, before six o'clock tonight. If you don't, legal council will be breaking down your front door in the morning.'

Karl Clark banged his fist down on the desk, then stuck his knuckles in his mouth and bit down on them in anger.

'Right,' he said at last. 'Get the wretched woman out of her cell and kick her out. But make sure she doesn't leave this building one minute before six o'clock tonight, is that clear?'

Bill nodded and turned to the door. He could not wait to leave Karl Clark's office.

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The heavy steel door swung shut behind Agatha Crow, and for the first time in ten years she smelled freedom. She inhaled deeply, and when she smiled her broken and yellow teeth were stumps in her mouth. Ten years was a long time, it had brought lines to her face and

had stolen the colour from her hair. After a quick glance around she set off, eager to get as far away from this godforsaken building as her feet could carry her.

At forty years of age, Agatha Crow was a big woman. The police would describe her as being of average height, but ten years of prison life had given her a strong body, strong enough to look after herself in a hell-hole where fights were not just a way of life, but also a way of death, if a prisoner was not careful.

She knew where she was headed. With the small amount of money she had in her pocket she would only be able to keep going for a few days, but that would not be a problem for her. Her more immediate problem was that Karl Clark's men would be tailing her. She knew he wanted her back behind bars, back where he could keep an eye on her, but she had played her cards well, had been well behaved the past twelve months, giving him nothing to hold against her. And now she was free, and there was nothing the son of a bitch could do to her.

At the bottom of the steps she turned left, joining the meagre crowd on the sidewalk. It was a long walk to where she wanted to be, but it was the first time in ten years she would walk in freedom. The clothes she wore were ill-fitting, they had been bought by an Agatha Crow of ten years ago, a woman who had been skinny and sexy and athletic, not strong and powerful.

A cool breeze blew through the streets, taking some of the oppressive heat out of the day. Few people noticed her or even looked at her. In the small town of Hacksville the streets were already quiet. Behind her, a car pulled out of a parking bay and followed her at walking pace.

The changes ten years had wrought on the city were obvious. Within a block she noticed some of the good old shops were gone, while here and there new buildings had replaced others. At the corner of Ross and Seventh Avenue she stopped at a small café, unable to resist the smell of curry coming from its open doors. She stepped inside, and immediately she was back in the years before her imprisonment, in the dark dingy back-world behind the courthouse, prison and police station.

Two years of her life had been lived here. Being arrested, getting bail and then having the bail apposed. So it had gone on for two years, a nightmare that seemed to have no ending. Then, when it did end, the real nightmare had begun, with the ten year prison sentence in Hacksville. During those first two years, the café's around the courthouse was where she had eaten lunch, where she had learned how the law worked, or didn't work.

She came out of the café eating a greasy but aromatic curry. Sauce dribbled down her chin and she wiped at it with her sleeve, letting her taste buds feast on spices they had not tasted in ten years. Deep inside her the anger was boiling, but she kept it in check. Tonight would be a night of freedom and enjoyment. There would be plenty of time for anger later on.

Whoever was in the car behind her was not being very professional about it. They simply followed her from block to block, not even trying to be inconspicuous. Karl's men, eager to get her back where they believed she belonged. For a minute or two she toyed with the idea of taking them on, making them pay for their loyalty towards Karl, but she let the

thought go. There were more important things to do. Let them follow her. They were wasting their time, she was not going to be breaking the law just yet.

Just...yet.

It would be a two hour walk to get out of town and through the suburbs, and then another three hours before she would get to the mountains. From there, it would take her a few hours to walk into the mountains and up to the house where she was headed. Prison life had not been good to Agatha, she knew she was not fit enough to make such a trek in one night. Yet for now she would walk, building up the strength she would need in the coming days, enjoying her freedom.

Agatha's mind turned to Amy, the daughter she had seen for the last time on the day Judge Stone had found Agatha guilty and sent her to prison. Amy had been only four years old then. On that day Agatha's husband had turned her daughter away from her, and Agatha had never seen her or heard from her again. The girl would be fourteen now, Agatha realised with a sense of bitterness. Amy, with her twinkling green eyes and long black hair, on whose face there had always been a smile. If Agatha had gone to a halfway house or any place that would help reintroduce her to society, she might have had a chance of seeing Amy again.

But that was not part of the plan. She had to let Amy go, keep Amy out of what she was planning and make sure she didn't mess up her daughter's life. The girl had suffered too much already.

The city seemed to have sprouted neon lights by the thousands during the years she had been incarcerated. Three blocks on she dumped the empty curry cup into a dustbin, smacking her lips. She tried to keep her head clear as the city blocks crawled past one by one. She had half-hoped that the weather tonight would be stormy, with lots of thunder and lightning and driving rain to add to the drama of her newfound freedom, but instead she had to make do with a mild night and cool clear sky.

After a few more blocks her feet were beginning to hurt. She looked down at the shoes she was wearing and sighed. Of course they were completely inappropriate for what she was doing. She had worn them at her last court appearance in a bid to look decent, they had been taken from her when she'd entered prison and had been returned to her when she'd left, and they were anything but comfortable for walking in.

She had enough money to stay in a cheap motel and get better suited clothes in the morning, but she wanted to get out of this town, away from the stink of the prison which she could still smell on herself. She wanted to get into the mountains, to where the air would be fresh. After a quick glance behind her to check if she was still being followed she stepped to the curb and knocked on the window of a taxi. A minute later she was heading out of town in the back of the cab, the black car still following.

Britney would not have company tonight. Britney with her broken laugh, her broken mind and her everything-but-broken eyes.

Britney, who had taught Agatha the secrets.

Britney 'Barkers' Jackson had shared the cell with Agatha for many years. Convicted on three counts of murder, the woman had been given every chance to spend the rest of her life in a mental institute instead of jail, but Britney had given life the middle finger and decided she preferred criminals above madmen. So she had ended up in Hacksville prison, the maximum security prison in the middle of a small town where everybody knew everybody, and half the population were old inmates of the prison itself.

She'd been there for five years when Agatha arrived, young, scared, and innocent. And she'd been there two hours later in the mess hall, when Lollypop had told Agatha to fucking move off that fucking chair because it was her fucking chair. Agatha had started rising. She'd heard stories about prison, about fights, about deaths, and she would do anything to avoid confrontation. But Britney had leaned over the table, grabbed Lollypop by the shoulder and punched her lights out.

Any other prisoner would have been awarded time in solitary confinement for this. But, as Agatha was to learn later that night, Britney 'Barkers' Jackson had a special gift that kept warders at bay.

'Sit!' she'd commanded, and Agatha had found herself unable to disobey.

'You need some looking after, some training up. Don't worry, I'll take care of you.'

Outside the car window the city slowly passed by. Every so often they stopped at a red light or a crossing, but Agatha's eyes were no longer seeing the outside scenery, they were seeing the past.

Britney had been as good as her word, she had taken Agatha under her wing, and had taught her the way of prison life. Oh, there had been a price to pay, a dear price that Agatha had carefully written out of her life, but it had been worth the price.

On the first night in their cell Britney had made Agatha stand up straight in front of her, had put her index finger under Agatha's chin and had turned her face this way and that, looking deep into Agatha's eyes. Then she'd brought Agatha's face back to face her, not once breaking eye contact.

Britney had green eyes, the greenest eyes Agatha had ever seen. As those eyes had bored into her Agatha had felt herself drift away, the walls around her disappeared and then she was standing in bright light, and the prison was there no more.

'You feel sleepy, Agatha,' Britney had said in a singsong voice, full of mesmerizing cadences.

Agatha stared into the green eyes, and did not say a word.

'You feel very sleepy, you want to go to sleep, you are asleep,' Britney had said again in a kind voice, and then she'd pressed her forefinger into the centre of Agatha's forehead. Agatha had gone over like a sack of potatoes, landing on her bed, passed out.

In Agatha's life, that had been the first time she'd been hypnotised.

Outside, the city started to fall away, the buildings and houses started thinning out. The cab picked up speed as the man slowly pressed the accelerator, going just as far over the speed limit as he thought he could get away with. It was the first time in ten years she had been in a vehicle, the front of this one looked extremely modern. Ten years had been a long time, and her time in prison would have been longer if it hadn't been for Britney.

It hadn't taken Agatha long to settle into the routine of prison life, she and Britney had been good friends from the start. Britney had explained the hypnosis to her, and Agatha knew there was something she did, something that Britney got out of her when she was hypnotised, but Britney had always been careful to clear her mind, so it had stayed a secret.

A few weeks after Agatha joined Britney in her cell, Agatha had asked Britney to teach her how to hypnotise people. Oh, how Britney had laughed, a scornful laugh full of hatred and madness and memories of death and murder, but for some reason she had agreed, and Agatha's training had begun.

It had taken Agatha more than two years to learn the secrets and to perfect the technique. Agatha had been patient, and so had Britney, and when Agatha had at last managed to hypnotise a new inmate she and Britney had celebrated by sharing a joint and giggling like girls late into the night.

Outside the present drifted past, inside Agatha's mind, the past drifted past. She jumped in her seat when the driver spoke to her.

'Did you realise that we were being followed?' he asked calmly.

'Yeah, I know,' she answered, not bothering to turn around to check on the car behind them.

'They've just turned around and gone back,' said the driver.

Now Agatha did turn around to look out of the back window, just in time to see the red taillights of her followers disappear around a bend in the road.

'They probably just wanted to make sure I left town,' she said, and slumped back into the car seat, staring out into the black night.

A few minutes later the cab's wheels crunched onto gravel as the driver pulled over onto the hard shoulder of the road.

'You sure you want me to drop you here?' he asked. 'It looks a bit deserted.'

'Don't worry, I have a little place up in the mountains, and it's a lovely road to walk in the dark. How much do I owe you?'

Agatha left the main road and entered the forest, slowly walking along the gravel road she had known so well, so long ago.

Her thoughts returned to the town of Hacksville, the small town where everybody knew everybody else. She'd lived there most of her life, had grown up there. Before her imprisonment she could probably have greeted half the town by name, from the newspapers that she sometimes got hold of in prison she knew nothing much had changed in town over the past ten years. Old Gerald Hoffman was still the mayor, Patricia Covey still ran the local newspaper and Weston Baker was still a detective with the police force.

Her thoughts turned to Weston Baker, the man who had put her behind bars. She had kept an eye on him over the past ten years, saw how the lines had started showing under his eyes, his nose had grown bright red from the many whiskeys he drank at night. Only a few weeks after Agatha had entered jail, Weston's daughter Dinah had started school, and only a few weeks before Agatha's release from prison, Dinah had been top of her class for the third year running.

In a small town, the newspapers kept tabs on everybody.

The gravel road wound steeply up the mountainside, and it wasn't long before Agatha's legs started complaining about the unaccustomed exercise. She stopped frequently to rest, but halfway to the house she was wishing she'd thought of buying a bottle of cool-drink to bring with, she was beginning to get thirsty as hell. The stupid shoes she was walking in didn't help either, her feet were killing her. She sat down on a fallen log next to the road, waiting to get her breath back.

Shit! Twelve years ago she could have jogged up and down this path in an hour, and still have enough energy left for a few lengths in the concrete dam behind the house as well. Back in those days she had done a lot to keep her body beautiful, the young men who had frequented the house could never keep their eyes off of her.

Back then she had been athletic, now she was a powerfully built woman. While in jail she had worked out hard on the few pieces of equipment available to the prisoners, because the stronger woman had less to fear from other prisoners and the warders. Physical strength had meant safety. But now she was tired, and she still had a long way to walk.

It didn't matter, she told herself as the moon peered over the eastern mountains. She had all the time in the world, she had the whole night to get up to the house, and after a few hours' sleep she would be feeling strong again.

She got up from the log and continued up the path. Her mind shifted back to the past, back to that day twelve years ago when Weston Baker had confronted her on the street, had accused her of a murder she could never have committed, and had slipped the handcuffs around her wrists.

Involuntarily, her hands massaged her wrists, as if she could still feel the cold steel of those cuffs against her skin.

He'd told her what her rights were, and then he'd taken her down to the police holding cells, and on that night her life of hell had begun. Back then Weston Baker had been young, well built with neatly trimmed black hair and broad shoulders, he could almost have

been handsome if it wasn't for the fraudulent claims of murder he was levelling against her. And somehow she had known that he knew the claims were false. He knew, but there had been a murder and he had to come up with a guilty party, and he had chosen her. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice.

In the night, as the moon rose in the east and Agatha walked up to the old house in the mountains, she could still hear the lies in his voice.

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There was a light burning in the main bedroom window of the house. Agatha sat with her back against a gnarly old pine tree and watched the house. The moon was well up, it had taken her almost two hours to walk the last part of the path up the mountain.

The house they had called Serenity was just as she remembered it. Set against the backdrop of the mountains, with a set of stairs leading up one side to the wide wooden veranda that ran all along the front of the house. The front door, now mostly hidden in shadows, was a glazed double door, on each side was a narrow window. All the main living spaces faced this way and, except for the main bedroom, each one's window was dark in the night.

Agatha listened carefully, but around her the night was silent. She was getting tired, it had been a long day. Last night, lying in bed knowing it was her last night in prison and that she would soon be walking the streets a free woman, she had been more scared than she could have imagined. She had nobody to turn to, her parents were long dead, her husband had divorced her and taken a new wife, she knew nobody on the outside. There had only been the plan, the plan for revenge, and it had kept her company throughout her last night in prison. Then morning had arrived, dawning on a day that saw her meeting with various prison officials for whom she didn't give a damn. Late in the afternoon she had said goodbye to Britney. That had been the single most difficult part of the day, and Agatha had cried for a long time, promising Britney that she would come visit her. Both of them knew that Agatha was lying, because Britney knew about Agatha's plan.

She stood up, brushed the leaves off the seat of her pants and started walking towards the house. Next to the house, in the shadow of a rusting lean-to, she found something that made her stop. It was an old panel van, like the ones the delivery people used to use. But this one she recognized, it was one that had belonged to Charlene, in a world long ago. Her mind took her back to one of the last memories here, and she wasn't surprised to remember that Charlene had been there, and that Charlene had loved the place almost as much as she did.

So Charlene was still here.

Without bothering to be quiet she climbed the ancient wooden steps to the veranda, walked boldly to the front door and knocked. In the dark she closed her eyes and listened intently. She heard shuffling sounds in the house as someone drew near, then the veranda light was switched on.

'Who's there?' came a voice she could instantly recognize from the past, the voice of Charlene Rainer.

'It's me Charlene, Agatha Crow. I need a place to sleep,' said Agatha, and then held her breath. Charlene would know that she'd been in jail for murder. Would she open the door to a murderer in the middle of the night?

'Agatha!' said Charlene in surprise, and immediately the bolts on the front door were pulled back and the door swung open, and there stood Charlene in the doorway, her long blond hair just starting to turn grey, her green eyes sparkling and her skin tanned dark brown.

'Hi Charlene. Sorry to bother you, mind if I come in?' asked Agatha, smiling and feeling a bit embarrassed.

Charlene swung the door wide open and stood back so that Agatha could enter. 'What are you doing here? Last I knew you were still locked up in The Hack,' said Charlene, her face radiating concern for the woman.

'Got released tonight, kicked out without ceremony. Mind if I kip here for the night? I haven't really got anywhere else to go.'

'Come on through to the kitchen, I'll make you a cup of coffee,' said Charlene. 'Imagine that, you rocking up here after all these years. I can tell you, this old place hasn't been the same without you!'

Charlene led the way through to the kitchen, where she switched on the kettle for coffee.

'Mind if I have some water first? I'm parched from the walk up this mountain. I'm not as young as I used to be!' said Agatha.

'Here you go,' said Charlene, taking a glass off the shelf and opening the fridge to get a pitcher of cold water out. She filled the glass and placed both the glass and the pitcher in front of Agatha. 'So you were released tonight?'

Agatha drained the first glass of cold water and refilled the glass before answering.

'Yep. I think they wanted to keep me, they even had me followed when I left, but my followers gave up when they saw me leaving town. They probably thought I was heading for the next town, and that they would never see me again.'

Charlene was studying her carefully. 'That walk up from the main road is strenuous even for me these days, you look tired. Have you had anything to eat?'

'Yeah, don't worry, I ate before I left town. For tonight, it's a bed that I'll be wanting, somewhere to put my head down.'

When the kettle boiled Charlene made coffee and sat down at the kitchen table opposite Agatha. 'How did you get here?' she asked.

'I caught a cab from town to the turn-off, then I walked up,' answered Agatha, sniffing the coffee appreciatively. She looked at Charlene Rainer, who was staring at her in wonder, and she could feel twelve years' worth of questions coming on. She quickly held up her hand.

'Let's talk tomorrow, Charlene, I'm just too tired right now. Right now, what I want is to finish this coffee, have a quick shower, and then get my head down.'

Charlene smiled. 'Don't worry, I understand, I feel the same way when I walk up from the road. You finish that coffee, I'll go check the middle bedroom and the bathroom for you.'

With that she got up from the table and headed out of the kitchen, leaving Agatha to drink the first good cup of coffee she had tasted in ten years.

Thirty minutes later Agatha Crow was asleep, exhausted after a long day.

Chapter 2

She could hear birds singing. It brought her out of sleep, because the singing was out of place, no birds ever came near enough to the cells of The Hack for the inmates to hear them sing. And the bed felt comfortable and warm, and that was all a dream. For a moment she wished that it could be true, but any moment now reality was going to reassert itself and then the horrible truth would be back.

Slowly, the sleep left her and the memories of the previous night came back, and it was true. She was not in The Hack, she was in Serenity, out of prison and out of town, up in the mountains where the air was clean. For the first time in more than ten years morning brought the smell of clean linen instead of the stinking toilet in the back of the cell she'd shared with Britney.

A smile crossed her face as she hugged the pillow tightly, feeling tempted to stay in the warm, soft bed, to sleep late. At last she opened her eyes and took in the room. It was the middle of the three bedrooms, the one she had always slept in when she'd visited Serenity, and it was almost exactly the same as the last time she'd seen it more than eleven years ago. The brown carpet was threadbare and could probably do with replacing, the cupboard's doors did not close anymore and the place could definitely do with a coat of paint. But it was still the same old room.

There was a soft knock on the door, which opened before Agatha had time to answer. Charlene walked into the room, carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

'Morning sleepy head,' she said, sitting down on the bed and offering Agatha one of the cups.

'Morning Charlene,' said Agatha, taking the cup and pulling up her stiff legs to make space for Charlene. 'Coffee in bed, god, next thing I'll be thinking I'm in a bloody hotel!'

The coffee's rich dark aroma drifted up to her nose, coffee like she had not smelled in years. She closed her eyes and sniffed deeply, letting the aroma fill her whole mind.

Charlene studied her carefully, taking in the stringy grey hair and lined face, wondering what had happened to the sexy girl she had known twelve years ago. At last she shook her head, a look of sympathy crossing her face. 'You look like shit Agatha Crow, ten years in The Hack hasn't done you any favours.'

'Don't I just know that,' said Agatha and shrugged. 'But at least you know where I've been for the past ten years. What about you, what have you been up to and why are you living in Serenity? I was expecting to find old Mr Saunders here.'

'Hah, old Saunders died and did me the favour of not having a last will and testament. I got this place for a song. I still work in town, but this is my home now.'

Agatha looked at the woman who she had not expected to find in the house. She was about the same age of Agatha, just on the wrong side of forty, but she was carrying her years well. Her long blond hair was neatly combed, her face still relatively wrinkle free and her body still stood up well.

But Agatha had expected to find Mr Saunders in the house, and she'd had plans for old Mr Saunders, like helping her to take revenge. Now she was going to be stuck with Charlene, and she'd need a few hours to think this over. Not to worry, she thought, she had plenty of time.

'Do people still come here, Charlene, like they used to do before I got locked up?'

Charlene shook her head. 'No, when old Saunders died the cops found out about the place, found out about the drugs everybody had been using here, and the people stopped coming. Now it's just me here, mostly.'

'Are you still single?' asked Agatha, a look of surprise on her face. 'A pretty girl like you?'

Charlene laughed. 'I have the occasional boyfriend, but for the moment I am single, yes,' she said.

Agatha shook her head in disbelief before speaking again. 'I need a few favours, Charlene. To start off with, I haven't got anything to wear except the clothes I came to your door in last night. Is it possible that we can do a spot of shopping at some stage?'

Charlene laughed her cheerful laugh. 'Of course! I tell you what, I need to be at work in an hour and a half, but my shift today is only five hours. Ride into town with me, do your shopping and make sure you're back at my workplace by the time I finish, and you can catch a lift back with me. What else can I help you with?' she asked.

'Just the clothes for now, let me enjoy my first day as a free woman on the street, we can worry about the rest later.'

'Sounds good to me. You know where the bathroom is, someone left some clothes behind, you can wear those today, they should fit you. If you hurry up we can still do breakfast before we head out!'

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Charlene turned the panel-van onto the blacktop and headed towards town, while the weather report on the radio predicted a clear summers' day. They drove in silence, each absorbed in their own thoughts, until Charlene looked at Agatha out of the corner of her eye.

'Agatha?' Charlene asked.

'Yeah?'

'Mind if I ask you a personal question?'

'Go right ahead, I'll tell you if it's too personal,' said Agatha.

'Years ago, when you first got arrested for that murder, well, a lot of us believed that you were innocent, we believed every word you said at your trial. So I was wondering, were you innocent?'

Agatha looked at Charlene in surprise. It had never occurred to her that there might have been people out there who believed in her innocence. In her world, once she had been convicted, everybody had thought her guilty. Back then she had hated everybody in the world for not believing her.

'I never did murder that boy,' said Agatha softly, staring straight ahead out of the car's windscreen but once again looking into the past. 'I never touched him, and his death had nothing to do with me. I swear that.'

Charlene glanced at her again.

'So now that you're out, are you planning on doing something about it? Are you going to try to prove your innocence?'

Agatha was quiet, thinking. Yeah, she was going to do something about it, but proving her innocence would be of no help, she had already put in the time. No, doing something was going to be all about revenge.

'You know what, Charlene? When I walked into that prison, I was innocent, as innocent as a person could be. But there is something about prison life that robs a person of all innocence, and I can tell you I did things in that prison that no-one knows about, except maybe Barkers, and she won't talk. I'm definitely not innocent anymore. As for doing something about the fact that I was locked up for a crime I did not commit, yes, I'm definitely going to do something about that.'

Charlene took her eyes off the road long enough to see the hatred etched deep into the lines of Agatha's face. Here was a woman who had spent ten years, ten god dam years of her life, stuck behind bars for a crime that nobody except the judge and jury believed she'd committed. How the hell the woman had managed to stay sane was beyond Charlene, who was sure she herself would have cracked long ago.

'Agatha, if there's anything I can do to help, you just tell me,' she said calmly.

Now it was Agatha's turn to look at Charlene, and her eyes had a cheerful smile in them.

'Let's talk about it tonight, then I'll tell you my plan,' she said.

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Agatha spent the morning shopping, getting the basic clothing she would need, including a blue cap that she pulled low over her eyes to avoid being recognized. With the shopping bags in hand she started checking out the town, what had changed, what hadn't. The day was as bright and sunny as the weather report had promised.

In the afternoon she went to the public library and waited, watching, pretending to be reading the newspapers that were spread on a big table in a sunny corner. It was strange, she thought. Ten years ago, at the time of her trial, the newspaper headlines had been dominated by news of her being sent to prison. Ten years later, on the date of her release, there was not even a whisper about her. It was probably because the town had grown so much, Agatha thought. And because ten years was such a long time, long enough for people to forget a lot of things. She would have to remind them.

Eventually the two girls arrived, one about nineteen years old, leading another of about six years old by the hand. They walked into the library together, and the older girl left the younger one in the children's section while she herself went to the general section.

Agatha watched the young girl carefully. Her shoulder length black hair was held in place with hairclips, and her slight build and fair skin stood out. She pulled a few of the easier books from the shelves and paged through them, then she walked over to the table with the crayons and colouring posters that the young ones could keep themselves busy with. She looked like a happy girl.

Of all the people Agatha had kept a watch on during her time in prison, Jenna Stone had been the most difficult to get information on. Two nights ago Agatha had destroyed the only photograph of Jenna she had, to make sure it was not found in her cell, the photograph would have given her game away. But she had memorized the face, and this was definitely the girl.

Waiting until the two left the library again Agatha carefully noted the time, and then waited five minutes longer before leaving.

The library would be a good place to speak to Jenna Stone.

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Half an hour after arriving back home that evening Agatha rocked backwards and forwards on the ancient swing chair on the veranda and let the calmness of the house flow over her.

Serenity – the house had always been called that. Way back, before her life had been stolen from her, they had often come here on weekends, in fact they had come here as often as they could. This was a place where a person could light up a joint in the certain knowledge that inquisitive neighbours weren't going to smell anything and call the cops, because the closest neighbours were miles away. Nobody would even notice if anybody was so drugged that they couldn't remember what day of the week it was. Back then the owner had been Mr Saunders, and for a few dollars and a bit of marijuana to keep him happy they got a room to sleep in and they had the run of the place. Old Saunders had turned a blind eye to the occasional line of coke that appeared on the table and didn't make a nuisance of himself. He'd welcomed them, back in those days.

The house was a magnificent old farmhouse set against the mountain, with a great veranda running along the front and three bedrooms and two bathrooms in the house itself. Old Saunders had lived in the main bedroom where Charlene now lived, and whoever came first on a Friday afternoon could pick from the available rooms in the house. Because the house was built on the mountainside there were two more rooms under the house, each with a small area containing a toilet and a shower. On most weekends old Saunders had made a handsome income out of the house.

Behind the house, and Agatha had already checked to make sure it was still there, was the old round concrete farm dam where a body could cool down on a hot summer day, chilling out with a beer and a joint.

Charlene had modernised the kitchen a bit, she'd thrown out the ancient old stove and installed a modern gas cooker, but other than that almost everything still looked the same. Even the furniture in the lounge and dining room was the stuff that had been in the house when the old man had passed away, Charlene had bought everything with the house.

From the veranda a person could see for miles over the forest. If someone was to turn on the stereo to full volume right now, not a soul would hear it other than her and Charlene, the closest neighbour was just too far away.

Charlene came out of the house carrying two cups of coffee, one of which she handed to Agatha before she sat down on the balustrade that ran along the front of the veranda.

'Thanks,' said Agatha. 'This is really good coffee, it smells like heaven compared to the mud I've been drinking the past ten years.'

'You'll get used to it again, Agatha,' said Charlene, smiling. 'So tell me, what exactly are you going to do about proving your innocence?'

'I have a plan,' said Agatha. 'It will take a bit of doing, but with a bit of help from you it could work real well.'

'Sounds like you've already thought things over,' said Charlene.

Agatha laughed. 'I've had ten years. Ten years, I might add, spent in the close company of Britney Barkers.'

At this Charlene also laughed. 'I only met Barkers once, right here at Serenity, but hell I could immediately tell that her nick-name was appropriate. Did the two of you get along?'

'Yeah, she was good to me, was Britney, looked after me and wouldn't let any of the others near.'

'So tell me what your plan is,' said Charlene.

Agatha looked at Charlene with a smile on her face, and stood up from the swinging chair. She put her coffee on the patio table and smiled at Charlene.

'Before I tell you, let me show you a trick that Britney taught me,' she said. 'Put down your coffee and stand up, you'll enjoy this.'

With only a fleeting moment of apprehension Charlene did as Agatha said, not feeling she needed to fear anything from the woman.

'I promise, this won't hurt a bit, it's just a bit of trickery Britney was good at, and she taught me how to do it. It is all part of how I am going to implement my plan, so it's important that you understand,' she said, and moved to stand right in front of Charlene.

She placed her finger under Charlene's chin and moved her head first to the left and then to the right, looking straight into the woman's eyes. Charlene's eyes followed her, turning in their sockets as her head turned.

'Lift up your arms, hold them up to shoulder height,' said Agatha, letting go of Charlene's chin and stepping back, but never breaking eye contact.

Charlene did as she was told, holding her arms up.

'Now I want you to concentrate on my eyes, Charlene. You are starting to feel sleepy. It's getting difficult to keep your hands up. You're getting very sleepy. In moments, you will be asleep.'

She spoke in the singsong voice that Britney had taught her, and she could feel how Charlene was coming under her spell.

'Your eyelids are starting to become heavy, you are feeling sleepy. Forget about all your worries, Charlene, and close your eyes when you are ready.'

She waited until she saw Charlene's eyelids start to droop, lifted up her left hand and held Charlene by the back of her neck so she wouldn't fall down, then pressed the thumb of her right hand firmly into the centre of Charlene's forehead.

'Go to sleep,' she said.

Charlene's eyes snapped shut and she went limp.

With a practised hand Agatha caught her and sat her down on one of the patio chairs, then stood smiling over the recumbent figure of the woman before sitting down next to her and speaking softly. There was another trick Britney had taught her. Always use your victim's surname as the switch, that way you could not forget the magic word, the word that would place them under your power.

'Listen to me carefully Charlene. In a few minutes I am going to wake you up, and you are not going to remember anything about this conversation. What you will remember is this, if I ever call you by your name and your surname together, you will be completely under my power, and you will do exactly as I say. You will not be able to do anything other than what I say, and you will do it with pleasure. We are going on a little mission, the two of us, and you are going to help me. Now I am going to wake you up, and when you wake up, you will feel refreshed, you will feel awesome. I am going to count down from three to one, and when I get to one, you are going to wake up. Three, Two, One.'

Charlene's eyes fluttered open, and she looked around.

'What happened?' she asked, surprised to find that she was sitting down on one of the chairs.

'You dosed off,' said Agatha, smiling kindly. 'Tough day at work?'

'Not really,' said Charlene, stretching out. 'I feel great though.'

She reached out for her coffee and Agatha watched her drink, the first part of her plan successfully implemented. Yes, it hadn't been old man Saunders, but Charlene would do just as well. And that white panel-van of hers was going to come in ever so handy.

*

Slipping between the blankets, Agatha thought back to what she had told Charlene earlier in the day. She had entered the prison an innocent person, but nobody in prison kept their innocence for long. It was not a survival trait. The day after Barkers had knocked Lollipop out cold, Lollipop had taken her revenge by sending one of her woman after Agatha. The woman, Naomi, had punched Agatha so hard that two of her teeth had broken, and she'd only woken up in the infirmary, bleeding badly. The warders had thought it was a bit of fun, a lesson that Agatha could do with. They hadn't done anything about it.

Agatha, scared out of her wits by this new life she was living in, hadn't done anything about it, and Britney had made it clear that the next person who touched Agatha Crow would be leaving the prison with a toe-tag. But Agatha had marked the woman who had punched her, and had spent her life avoiding the woman as much as she could. She had no doubt that the woman would try to kill her if Lollipop gave the order.

During her third year in The Hack, the prison had been wracked by a bad stomach bug. Agatha had landed up in the infirmary, dehydrated and suffering from a high fever. She lay there sweating for two days, and the fever was just starting to break when Naomi had been brought in, and given the bed next to Agatha's.

Suffering from a high fever and shivering violently, Naomi had been put on a ventilator, and her laboured breathing had kept Agatha awake deep into the night. In her feverish condition Agatha had remembered her first days in The Hack, and she had remembered her fear, and her hatred, of Naomi.

The woman never knew what hit her. Agatha had woken her up, and even though she had been drugged and was suffering from a fever, she had gone into hypnosis three minutes after Agatha told her to look into her eyes. And then Agatha had spoken to her, instructing her. She would wait until Agatha was released from the infirmary before she acted.

The next morning, fearing that the hypnosis would wear off before she could do as she had been instructed, Agatha had insisted that she was well enough to return to her cell. That had left Naomi alone in the infirmary, still with a raging fever.

The next time a warder came to check up on her, Naomi had gone for the warder's weapon, and a fierce struggle had ensued, from which the warder had barely escaped with her life, and which had left Naomi dead in her bed, with a gunshot wound to the chest. The prison authorities had written the incident off to fever, but in her cell, Agatha had smiled broadly when she'd heard the shot ring out. That had been the end of her innocence, and the beginning of a new life.

In her bed in Serenity, Agatha drifted to sleep, praising the name of Britney 'Barkers' Jackson for the gift she had given her.

*

Early the next morning, on their way to town, Agatha carefully avoided the question about what she still needed in town. While Charlene was at work she was going to do a bit of shopping. Then she might go back to the library.

'Charlene Rainer, I want you to do me a favour today,' she said, looking carefully at Charlene.

Charlene's face went suddenly blank, devoid of emotion.

'Yes,' she said, and her voice was as neutral as her face.

'When we get to town today, I want you to park opposite the library, and I want you to walk to work from there. I want you to give me the keys to the van, I need them today. This afternoon, you can meet me there again, I will be waiting in the van. Understand?'

'Yes,' said Charlene, still in the neutral tone.

'Thanks. I also need you to stop anybody from visiting you at Serenity for the next week or two, because we are going to have some guests. Can you do that?'

'Of course,' answered Charlene.

'Good,' said Agatha, and sat back to relax. Presently Charlene came out of her trance, completely unaware of the instructions she had been given.

When they arrived at the office block where Charlene worked she drove past, stopping only three blocks further, in a parking lot opposite the library. Charlene handed over the keys and said goodbye, then walked to her office.

Agatha smiled, and immediately started walking to the older part of town, the blue cap pulled low over her eyes to keep people from recognizing her. Those two in the car that had followed her out of town the other night would have spread the word that she'd left, it was best to keep up that lie.

She spent some time drinking coffee at a little coffee shop, idly watching the comings and goings at the primary school across the road while reading a newspaper. Just before eight she looked up sharply. The silver Mercedes she had been waiting for pulled into the parking lot of the school and the young lady she recognized from the library got out, walked around the car and opened the rear door. The young girl who had been with the older girl at the library yesterday got out of the car.

Agatha smiled. Jenna was wearing a bright pink floral dress and her black hair fell to her shoulders, even from across the street Agatha guessed that the blue spots on the pink dress would be flowers. For shoes she wore a pair of sandals that looked as if they too might have flowers glued to them. Jenna flashed a happy smile as she said goodbye to the older girl, took her schoolbag and turned to enter the school through the gate.

As soon as Jenna entered the school yard the older girl got back into the silver Mercedes and left, probably going back to the Stone residence where she was an au pair. On the opposite side of the road Agatha shook her head. The school was too secure, there was no way she would be able to speak to the child there. It would have to be the library.

An hour later she found a hardware store, from which she bought several lengths of chain and a pack of padlocks that looked sturdy. Realizing that she'd need something to carry everything in, she also bought a cheap blue backpack, and dumped everything inside. With the backpack slung over one shoulder and her cap once again pulled low over her eyes, she left the store.

Her cash reserves were starting to run low, but that didn't bother her much, she would soon have all the things she needed. She walked around for half an hour looking for a security shop, but eventually had to settle for asking a newspaper stall attendant where it was. She was directed back the way she had come, and then down a side-road. It didn't take her long to find it. This was a no-nonsense shop, with most of the merchandise behind a counter, as if the owner believed the people who wanted to buy security wares were the biggest criminals. Here she bought three sets of handcuffs, and an electric shock stick.

She remembered the electric shock sticks, some of the prison warders used to carry them, and on more than one occasion Agatha had been at the receiving end of them. If she used the stick on someone, and she did intend using it, she would get results.

With these latest items added to the backpack she left the shop and started walking to the other side of town, in the general direction of Hacksville High, the local secondary

school. School would not be out for a few hours though, leaving Agatha with spare time on her hands. With a smile on her face Agatha headed to the movie house to kill some time. It would be good to see a movie again. If she was lucky, there might even be a comedy showing.

*

Once again drinking coffee, this time in a little café opposite the secondary school, she was watching the children leave. The secondary school was much busier than the primary school had been, there were hundreds of children leaving the premises, heading in all directions. Many of the youngsters crossed the road and entered the café in which Agatha was sitting, but none of them paid her any attention.

She was just about to give up hope when she caught her breath, and an icy chill of hatred swept through her. Across the road, stepping out of a red pick-up truck, Weston Baker had just filled her whole view. In an instant Agatha lost all thought about the kid she was looking for, and every part of her concentrated on Weston Baker.

Her thoughts reeled back to a time twelve years ago. It had been a sunny day, just like today. She'd had a good joint, smoked in the back of the park where nobody ever bothered her, and she'd been on her way home when the two police vehicles had swung in, one ahead of her and one behind her. She'd known she was in trouble, in deep shit. There was no time to lose the joint she still had on her, and she could see these guys meant business.

The big guy from the front police vehicle had his weapon drawn, and Agatha had raised her hands without being asked, dropping the bag she'd been carrying. And then he'd told her his name, Weston Baker, and Agatha had thought they were going to search the bag and find the joint, but that had not happened. What did happen was that Weston Baker had told her to turn around and face the vehicle, and to place her hands on the vehicle. Agatha had obeyed without a word, her mind working furiously, trying to cope with the situation while high on dope, and losing the battle. The cop had pulled her arms down and put them behind her, first the right arm, then the left, handcuffing her. Then he'd said the one sentence that had changed the rest of her life.

'Agatha Crow, you are hereby placed under arrest for the murder of Victor Gardner.'

Under the warm sunshine, as Weston Baker had continued to read her her rights, Agatha's cigarette had fallen from her mouth, and her mind had reeled. She'd tried to protest, but the joint had taken hold of her, her mind had been like cotton wool. She'd thought she must be on a bad trip, that there had been something in the marijuana that had made her hallucinate, but nothing like this had ever happened to her before. And later, much later, when the high of the joint had left her body, she had still been in a holding cell at the police station.

In the café, burning with anger, Agatha rubbed her wrists, feeling again the ice cold steel of the handcuffs that had bound her.

Across the road a young girl hugged Weston Baker, and Agatha snapped out of her memory as quickly as she'd gone into it. Oh yes, this was definitely the girl Agatha had memorised from newspaper clippings, and she was hugging her father, a dead giveaway. She had short, curly blond hair, wore wire-rimmed glasses and was just slightly overweight. Everything about her was neat, as neat as a pin. She was, Agatha knew, an over-achiever at school, doing well in every subject she chose to put her mind to. Not athletically, but that didn't matter, because what everybody wanted from her were good marks.

Agatha waited for them to get into the red pickup and then waited for the truck to drive down the road before she left the café.

It was getting late, it was time she got back to the library.

*

'Hello.'

In the children's section of the library Agatha turned around in the chair to look at the speaker. It was Jenna Stone, wearing her pink floral dress. She was treating Agatha to a penetrating stare, trying to decide what the lady with the grey hair was doing in the children's section.

'Hello little girl,' said Agatha, giving the young girl a friendly smile. 'What is your name?'

'My name is Jenna. Why are you in the children's section?' she asked in a friendly but curious voice.

'I'm looking for a book to show me how to do tricks. It's to amuse my nephew,' lied Agatha, but she kept the smile on her face and held up the book she was reading so the little girl could see the cover. It was called *Tricks For Young Kids*, and the book was indeed filled with tricks, from card tricks to things an adult could do with coins that would mystify all but the most boring kids. 'Would you like me to show you one of the tricks I learned?' she asked.

Jenna smiled and nodded. 'Yes please,' she said politely.

'Let me see,' said Agatha, and pretended to roll up the sleeves of a jacket she was not in fact wearing. Jenna gave the obligatory giggle, and a smile covered her face.

'Lift up your arms, like this,' said Agatha, lifting her own arms to shoulder height to show Jenna what to do. The girl lifted her arms obediently, looking into the old woman's friendly face.

Agatha placed her finger under the girl's chin and turned her head this way and that, watching the girl's friendly green eyes follow her, never breaking eye contact.

'You are feeling sleepy, Jenna. Your eyelids want to close. You are battling to keep your arms up.'

She watched carefully as Jenna's eyelids started fluttering, and got ready to catch the girl. 'You are feeling very tired. You want to close your eyes. You want to drop your arms and go to sleep.'

As Jenna's eyelids drooped Agatha pressed her right thumb into the girl's forehead, and caught her with her left arm, setting her carefully down on the chair next to her. If anyone walked past right now, all they would see would be an old lady reading up on tricks for boys and girls, and the young Jenna Stone fast asleep in a chair. When Agatha spoke again it was in a soft whisper, making sure that nobody else in the library heard her.

'Jenna, in a few moments I am going to wake you up. I want you to leave the library without speaking to anybody. I want you to go straight outside. In the parking lot opposite the street is a panel-van, a white one. You are going to get into the back of the panel-van, and then you are going to lie down so that nobody can see you. You will stay there until I tell you that you can get up.'

Agatha looked around the library to make sure she was still completely alone.

'If I speak to you and I use your surname, you will obey any command I give you. Now I'm going to count down from three to one, and when I get to one, you will wake up and do exactly as I told you. Three, two, one.'

Jenna Stone opened her eyes and yawned, looking at the grey-haired old woman who was sitting next to her. Then, without saying another word, she got up and left the library.

Agatha left the children's section and walked over to the newspaper table where a collection of the day's newspapers were spread. She read newspapers until the librarian had passed her twice, making sure the librarian had noticed her sitting there. Then she left the library and walked across the road to the panel-van. She had ten minutes to wait for Charlene.

A quick glance through the window into the back of the panel-van showed her the form of the young Jenna Stone, lying down.

A few minutes later Charlene entered the parking lot and was heading towards the van when the library door was flung open and the au-pair and the librarian hurried out, anxiously scanning the street for Jenna.

By the time Charlene swung the van out of the parking lot the au-pair was on her phone. In the passenger seat of the van Agatha smiled to herself. That phone call was not going to do her any good.

*

'Charlene Rainer.'

'Yes?'

'From tonight on, there are going to be people in the house with us. I want you to ignore them. Don't tell anybody about them, and don't speak to them. Just ignore them, and ignore anything they do. Do you understand that?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' said Agatha, a grim smile on her face.

*