

Chapter 1

1968, New York City

It should have hit by now. Rachel looked at her watch, its hands gone melty.

“Anyone know what time it is?” she called into the shadowy stairwell.

Nobody on the steps answered, all staring inward, four art school friends lost in their own waking dreams, turning blurry, rippling.

“Can anyone hear me?” Rachel cried. A medallion of pink and green chicken claws spiraled out behind her eyelids. The light bulb on the landing sizzled, popped, went as black as a world before time. Wavering illumination leaked in through the window in the chipped enameled door to the corridor.

Rachel had never seen the world this way before, ethereal and changeable like a fever dream, drenched in longing and imbued with significance.

“Will you just sit down?” Justine waved her hand from the sixth step, leaving a vapor trail in the air. “You’re blocking the view.”

“Yeah,” Che said from the eighth step, his wild hair like black fire, hint of a Spanish accent bleeding through. “You’re rocking the blue.”

Justine let out a staccato assault of high-pitched laughter.

“Oh, oh, ohhhh...” Grace called out from higher up on the stairs. She leaned back, flung out her arms and legs. “Yes. Yes. Yes!” she cried, thrusting her pelvis up. “Oh yesss!”

Morgan, on the fifth step, shouted “I see it!” His face took on a glow as if lit by a pale blue spotlight. “The path to enlightenment.”

Rachel concentrated everything she had on Morgan, creating an oasis around him, following the lovely curve of his cheekbone into the soft prickly hollow of his cheek, the curve of his full lips, the luxuriance of his long brown hair, the same color as hers. They fit together, he and she, looked good together, that's what their friends said. She was glad he didn't tower over her like some guys. She could feel the warmth of his body, its feline sleekness, its strength. The way he looked at her with his moonlight-blue eyes was the way Jim Morrison stared out at the world from *The Doors* album cover: vulnerable, insolent, intense. The look of an artist.

"Sit down," Justine hissed. She slipped down a step, slid her little ass up next to Morgan's.

Thought she was so gorgeous with her bleached hair, hot pink lipstick, and too much mascara, stinking up the stairwell with her expensive perfume. And her art sucks. "I'm a real artist," Rachel whispered. She loved the sound of it. Artist. I am an artist, a creator. It came to her that an artist can transcend time, overcome it.

A hinge squeaked. It tasted salty. There was a draft, the piney scent of turpentine, the echoey clunk of a door slamming.

"Will you sit down?" Justine said, but she'd turned into—bzzz, bzzz, bzzz—electric snow.

Everything had.

There was no now anymore, no present tense; time spiraled in, eating its own tail. Rachel couldn't breathe, was suffocating, lungs imploding, no way out. She heard ripping—no, felt it—like taffeta tearing along the grain. She was thrown free, was hurtling, when—

she's someplace else.

There's a hacking pain in the back of her skull. Her skin's boiling from the inside. She has punching chest pain, raw throat, aching soreness.

She's blinking down at—*it can't be*—a gun in her shaking hand.

She tries to look around, but she can't move, can't control her own body. She wants to scream but she's paralyzed, standing there with her left hand covering her open mouth, staring down at a black revolver. It's heavy, cold, fits neatly into her palm.

This place... It feels familiar—brighter than the stairwell and startlingly silent. She inhales male sweat, weed, beer, perfume, and something else, like smoke from a cap gun, burning her nostrils.

She starts sucking in air and coughing—explosive bursts that she can't hear, knocking the wind out of her, doubling her over, the room jerking up and down, glimpses of—rumpled chartreuse T-shirt—*cough-cough-cough, cough*—squeezed-out tube of blue paint—scarlet rayon scarf—*cough*—the paint-splattered overalls and red Converse sneakers that she's wearing in this place—*cough-cough*—when...no, no, no...nude body face down on the floor. Just a flash of flesh and dark hair bleeding into a puddle of blood-red—*cough-cough-cough*—she tries to look back, but can't—*cough-cough*—Budweiser bottle—*cough*—severed paw with bloody claws—*cough*—something paisley—green flip-flop—*cough-cough, cough-cough, cough-cough-cough*—Morgan's desk chair with the red-lipped skull and crossbones he'd painted on the back, but different. Its backrest is fractured and splintered here—*cough-cough*—the body's fingers curled downward into the puddle of blood—*cough-cough-cough*—revolver in her own hand—

Then it's—

dark again, the dungeon twilight of the stairwell—sound back on—punching bag ribcage, airless landing.

And there were her friends, tumbling down their own rabbit holes, except Morgan who was gazing at her, his mind boring into her hallucinating brain.