

THE LANGUAGE OF DOORS

Handcuffed and hard-strapped into the rear seat of an NPF police van, Riley craned her neck to peer out the window at the passing streets. The court paperwork said she was being sent to a facility in Ballard, in north-west Seattle. She'd never been to Ballard before, but so far it seemed to consist mainly of quiet, tree-lined streets dotted with restaurants and cute shops. She thought it'd be fun to stop for coffee but suspected the armed and armored cops sitting up front might have something to say about the idea.

West on Sixty-Fifth, then north on Twenty-Fourth, she mouthed silently, memorizing the streets with each new turn, less interested in knowing where they were going than being sure she could reverse the sequence to get back out again.

Because she had zero intention of staying put.

It's a hospital; assuming I can't just talk my way out, how hard could it be to slip away and get back into the fray? The first obligation of a prisoner is to escape!

Agreeing to spend six months in a mental health facility instead of the Mission Creek Corrections Center was a calculated risk. Jails were good at hurting you on the outside, but psychiatrists knew all the ways to hurt you on the inside. Some of her friends who had gone into mental

hospitals for treatment came out stronger, but as for the rest, it seemed like every time they went in, a little less of them came back out again. She wanted no part of whatever *they* had in mind for *her* mind. She wanted only a wall low enough for her to climb over and get to the other side.

Four more turns brought them to a long, gated driveway beneath a sign depicting a bright ocean sunrise beside the words Westside Behavioral and Psychiatric Residences. A second sign just above it, newer and more hastily erected, read American Renewal Center #14.

They parked in front of a whitewashed three-story building labeled Inpatient Treatment. The upper-floor windows were covered in ornate wrought-iron designs: cats and dogs and giraffes and parrots woven into elaborate backgrounds of vines and branches. Bars designed not to *look* like bars to the people inside, even though that's exactly what they were. *Happy* barred windows.

They unstrapped her from the rear seat and led her through two sets of reinforced glass doors to the check-in station, where a receptionist in a bright green floral-print dress folded her hands and smiled in a calculated-to-the-kilowatt welcome.

As one of the officers handed over the paperwork, the other unlocked the handcuffs but kept a firm grip on Riley's arm in case she tried to run. The receptionist flipped through the pages and signed where required without making direct eye contact with her.

Screw that, Riley decided. Doctors, police, and serial killers had one thing in common: your odds of survival *absolutely* depended on making them see you as a human being.

"Hi!" she said, smiling broadly.

The receptionist glanced up, startled. "Hi," she said before she realized she'd done it, then quickly turned her attention back to the forms.

"Nice place."

The receptionist nodded but didn't reply, trained to avoid contact with new arrivals by remaining bureaucratically anonymous.

Okay, Riley thought. *Initiating the How Far Can I Push This Before You Realize I'm Fucking With You? program in five, four, three, two—*

"I don't want a room with a giraffe."

The receptionist paused, pen poised over the last line of the form. "Sorry?"

"The windows have animals on them, and giraffes freak me out. Something about the necks, you know? I get really nervous and scared and out of control, and I don't want to be any trouble. Can you check?"

Uncertain eyes flicked from Riley to the cops and back again. "I suppose . . . just a second."

A monitor flared to life, and with a few clicks she summoned up the details of Riley's assigned room. "It doesn't say. There's not a field for the window design."

"Can you find out?" Riley asked, still smiling.

The receptionist toggled a microphone on her desk. "This is Maria at the front desk. Could an orderly let me know what the window design is in room twenty-one forty-one?"

"Thanks, Maria," Riley said, enjoying the look on the receptionist's face when she realized that she'd not only acknowledged Riley's existence but had inadvertently provided her name.

The speaker buzzed back at her. "Parrot," a man's voice said.

"Parrot," the receptionist parroted.

"Perfect," Riley said, feigning relief.

The cop holding her arm shifted impatiently. "Can we get this over with?"

"Of course," the receptionist said, "sorry." She signed on the last dotted line, tore off the receipt at the bottom of the page, and handed it back. "All set."

She buzzed the intercom again, and a tall African American orderly came through a security door behind them.

"We're good to go," Maria said.

The orderly took Riley by the arm with 50 percent less pounds-per-square-inch of pressure, just enough to say *I've got you* without the subtext of *Does this hurt? Want to make something of it?*

As they passed into a long, puke-green hallway, Riley glanced at the nameplate pinned to his crisp white shirt: Henry.

“You know it’s safe to let go of me, right, Henry?”

“Probably, yeah, but the rules say we have to maintain contact and control of all patients until they’ve been processed.” His voice was firm but surprisingly gentle. “Just a little longer.”