Hope

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I ran, ran until I felt my legs could no longer carry this broken body, my body. Though the night was black, I had no worries of tripping or running into objects. The cool and wide expanse of sand brought relief to my bare feet after running on hard cement for the past half-hour. Despite the much appreciated temperature change, the sand slowed me down, making the already quick pace of my heart rush stronger towards the hope of freedom that lay before me. Out in the water sat a little boat. There, she was supposed to wait for me until midnight. Time was almost up. I escaped the facility around 11:00 p.m., believing an hour would be enough time to reach the boat. I was desperate to yell her name, let her be aware of my presence, but that decision would lead them here. I’d already eluded them twice, and wasn’t about to do it a third time. As long as I couldn’t hear their search dogs barking, I was safe, or at least it allowed me room to think.

_How long have I referred to her as “she”? It’s been nine months since I even thought her name._ Trying to keep it a secret from those...scum who held me here, _wherever here was_, had worn down on me. I hated to banish her name from my mind, but it was the only way to keep her safe, and out of any response I let slip from my lips during the daily interrogations. I couldn’t even think of her name now. Not yet.

Nine months, and I was never given an explanation as to why they took me away from my home. All I knew was it must have been a mix up, because all their “questions” were directed for someone I certainly wasn’t. “Where did you hide the money Mr. Ash? Who are you working with? How long has Riverside been under?” I hadn’t a clue what they were asking, but the mere memory of her face kept me alive, kept me strong, kept me believing. I would get out of that dark hole someday.

My “cell” was an opening in the ground about five feet in diameter and eight feet tall. The top was covered by part of a rusty gate. No hinges, no locks. The only thing keeping me from escaping were fifty pound weights my “watcher” would place on each corner point after he’d kick me into the pit. I
was allowed to relieve myself twice a day and I ate, surprisingly, three meals a day. They weren’t much, but I’m sure the scum wanted to keep me alive long enough to get the answers they needed. I’m sure they were desperate. They certainly weren’t being generous.

Every morning, maybe it wasn’t morning, I don’t know, it was very dark where I was kept. But after I’d wake up and bang on the gate loud enough to rouse my watcher from his violent snoring, he’d take me to another dark hole that served as my restroom and then to a somewhat normal looking room. Possibly an old office, of no use anymore other than to interrogate or torture victims. The four walls were painted black. They matched the bleak cement floor. There was one small window in the room, but I never saw what was outside of it, because of the thick velvet curtains always drawn close. A desk sat dead center in the square room with one chair on either side, perpendicular to the wall hiding the window. My watcher would stand by the door picking his teeth with a T-pin while I pulled out my storage of “I don’t knows” for the master. He was a dirty man, tall, lean and always covered in sweat. He kept his dark hair greased back and covered with a black fatigue hat just like my watcher. Both of them wore ripped jeans. My watcher went shirtless while the master wore what looked like the remains of a dark-gray pinstripe jacket. The sleeves were torn off.

I never left the room without feeling sore. My muscles ached constantly from either being too cramped in the pit or... well, it’s better not to think back on how they treated me.

Exactly how I got out of that macabre prison, I’ll never know. This morning I woke up needing to relieve the jabbing pain inside my bladder. I stole an extra water bottle the previous night when my watcher wasn’t looking. What a stupid plan. I didn’t hear his usual snoring, so I figured he was either out of the room or dead. The latter would be nice, but my bladder had other plans in mind, and if my watcher didn’t come back soon, we’d both have to deal with the bad odor for quite some time. Banging on the gate brought no one, so I decided to scream as loud as I could. Nothing.

Just as I pulled in another gulp of air, ready to scream again, I heard the weights scrape across the gate. Finally, I thought to myself. My watcher yanked me out of the pit. He had a smile on his face that sang with the wild eyes of a cat ready to pounce. Jerk. You must think it’s real funny to make a man pee...
his pants. Maybe he knows about the bottle I took. Crap... I’ll be sore tonight. We walked to my latrine then to the interrogation room. Inside, a man sat in the chair farthest away from me, not the master—no one I’d ever seen before. He motioned my watcher to leave. He left. That’s weird, I thought. Maybe they’ve had enough of me. Maybe they believe me. Maybe I’m being let go... Maybe they’re going to kill me. I suddenly felt the urge to look back towards the door, as if having my watcher leave the room took away some sort of unknown security. My body moved forward without my mind willing it so, probably out of habit from daily routine.

The man wore a long-sleeve black shirt, black pants and shoes, and a tan necklace made from some kind of thick string. He also had on the familiar black fatigue hat my watcher and the master wore everyday. With his head tilted down, the hat covered his face in shadows. His skin was paler than the master though, closer to my own complexion. This was what gave him away. He stood out like the moon shining on a clear night.

I sat down, weary of how close I was to this man cloaked in black. My back was rigid against the chair. He looked up at me, his eyes still veiled in darkness.

“Are you Robert Haley?” he asked.
“What?”
“Just answer yes or no.” His voice grew aggressive, as though this information were vital. Why would I give him my name? How did he even know my name?

This man must have felt the fear seep out of my body and cross the table; it was too dark for him to see it in my eyes. A name is special information. For me, it would be like giving him my social security number. So far, I had remained anonymous because the master kept calling me Mr. Ash. I thought they were clueless to my real identity. They must have taken my fingerprints while I was sleeping, but why wait nine whole months for something so simple?

The man reached across the table, his hand closed tightly in a fist, palm down. As he stopped, he flipped his hand over and opened his palm like it was a flower blooming. In the center of his hand was a gold necklace, a heart shaped locket with the initials “H.R.” engraved in the middle. Those two letters sparkled at me, a whisper of hello.

“She asked me to find you and help you get out.”
“She did?” I asked, but then snapped my mouth shut. This was too much information to reveal, though I couldn’t resist the urge to take the locket. As I reached out for it, his hand snapped shut. “Now is not the time Mr. Haley.”

I looked up at him completely stupefied. He tilted his chin down towards his chest so I couldn’t see his mouth move. “At 11:00 tonight, I will have you brought back into this room. You will have one hour to reach a boat that will be waiting for you out in the water. She is going to be on the boat. If you don’t…”

I cut him off, alarmed at the information he fed to me like a machine. “She’s coming for me? No, she can’t. You have to tell her to…”

He ignored me. “If you don’t reach the boat by midnight, she will leave. You have only this one chance. I will not help you again.” He got up and started for the door.

“Wait. How will I know how to get there? I don’t even know where I am now.”

He turned back. “There is no time for me to tell you now.”

“And my watcher?”

“He will be taken care of.” On this, he left the room.

I was taken back to my pit where I sat, scrunched against the hard rock, hopefully for the last time. The hours ticked away slowly while I waited in utter anticipation. My stomach was full of knots by the time I heard the weights being moved away from the gate. A hand reached into the hole and I took it immediately. Just as the man had said, my watcher had been “taken care of.”

He was slumped over in the corner; the full girth of his body looked silly. I stifled a laugh. Whoever pulled me out must have knocked him out; hopefully he would stay there for more than an hour. I didn’t bother looking at the man who now had his hand around my elbow, guiding me back to the interrogation room. The man cloaked in black stood by the window when I entered. His silhouette stood out sharply against the night sky. The window! It led outside the whole time. I could have…

“Quickly! You don’t have much time.” He spoke in urgent whispers and held his hand out toward me. If escape hadn’t been consuming my mind for the past several hours, I wouldn’t have been able to move. It was truly a beautiful sight. I felt my eyes begin to tear up but walked over to the window in four
long strides. The man helped me climb out the window, but before he shut it I stopped him, gripping the frame tightly.

“Wait. What’s your name?”

“There’s no time! You must go,” he barked lowly.

“I...thank you.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say to express my gratitude.

“You’re welcome.” His voice caressed the words. He pulled her locket out of his pocket, tossed it to me and shut the window with a faint smile. I put it on and tucked it into my shirt, holding it to my chest. It was warm.

I turned around and dashed from shadow to shadow until I felt safe enough to run. I certainly wasn’t in shape, but the movement felt good. My muscles began to heat as did my feet. The cement scraped against every step. I forgot I hadn’t been wearing any shoes. For five or ten minutes, all I could concentrate on was the burning cement against my feet until I heard the faint sound of dogs barking behind me.

Twice they were hot on my heels, but I ducked into a dumpster the first time and into a drain pipe the second. The horrible gases from decaying food must have covered my scent for which I was more than grateful. My hands shook fiercely each time I had to hide. I wished I had at least asked the man which direction to run in. I felt completely lost, but within another ten or fifteen minutes I could hear waves crashing in the distance, and soon enough the cement disappeared from underneath my sore feet.

Almost as swiftly as the heat from the cement transformed into the cool sand, the ground turned even cooler beneath my feet. The wet sand was harder and easier to run on. The crashing waves were just up ahead and I could see the glorious phosphorescence, lighting up each curl and edge of the waves. When the water touched my toes, the running stopped. But I knew I couldn’t stop altogether, or else I would collapse. Surely this would be the hardest part of my journey. I was never a good swimmer.

I felt completely blind. The saltwater crashed violently into my face, stinging my eyes. The taste of too much salt filled my mouth and lungs, burning with every splash that entered my nose. Half squinting, I swam frantically towards open water. I had no idea how far off she could be. The waves were getting taller, and back towards the beach, I could hear the faint barking of those stupid search dogs. I looked desperately for the little boat that would
take me away from this present terror. *Please…where are you?*

Suddenly, a flash of light shined on my face. For a moment, I thought it was the end. *I’ve been caught.* But the illumination came from the black waves, not the beach. Again, the light skimmed across the top of the waves and touched my face. *Hope!* Not just any hope, my beloved Hope. Her name swelled in my heart as did the image of her face, always flattered with the kiss of sunshine. I longed to see the golden stars in her brown eyes, the freckles that ran across her cheeks and nose, and to kiss her heart shaped lips. I swam toward the origin of the light, exhausting the last of my energy to reach her. The barking grew louder. *Almost. Almost there. Push. Just a little bit further.* Two hands, soft and delicate, suddenly grabbed my right arm and struggled to pull me in.

Hope’s silent tears became known to me when we embraced in the boat, her breath as ragged as mine. “Oh Robert,” she gasped with delight and trembling fear, her whole body shivered in my arms. “I was so worried,” she cried. A short whimper escaped her lips, into my ear. Desperate to calm her down, I pulled her away from my hold so I could settle my mouth against hers. Her lips were warm despite her chilled and bare arms. She responded the best she could, grabbing the back of my neck with her small hands. I tried to wipe away the tears from her moistened cheeks while kissing the rest of her face. In a hushed tone I told her we needed to leave. She pulled away from me this time; a gentle smile touched the corners of her mouth. Despite her fear, a new courage showed immediately. She took the oars in her hands and began to row towards an unknown destination. Back on the beach, the barking became silent. *I’m free.*

Hope continued to cry, but the sweet smile never left her face.