

CHAPTER ONE

She pawed at her open jacket; traced puffy lettering on the pink shirt underneath. Piano-keyed down to new jeans that felt stiff even after two rounds in the washer.

She must be alive then.

But there was more than one way to die.

A sledgehammer was pounding her skull, using it like an anvil. Eyes shuttered on the narrow cot, she moaned as a wave of vertigo overwhelmed her fragile sensory system. Blurred images—flashes of color---shot through a wind tunnel, disappearing down a black hole before she could grab hold of them. From somewhere inside her head, waves of tinny music washed over, earsplitting then faint in turns.

Muscle memory kicked in, but when she raised her head off the pillow, the room spun like a carnival ride, knocking her flat again. She lay back, still woozy, trying to catch her breath---waiting for the whirring inside her brain to stop—when a spasm coming from nowhere rocked her lower right leg, forcing her knee to retract. She yelped in pain.

The movement was accompanied by a metallic noise, but her fevered brain failed to connect the two events.

Some moments later the tension in her shoulders began to ease, the knot in her calf muscle uncoiling like a rope. Her denims had lifted above the ankle, and a coarse, prickly blanket bit into bare skin, reminding her of the one in the medical room at school.

They didn't want to make it too comfortable if you hadn't studied for a test or you got your period and didn't want to do Phys. Ed.

But the cover didn't smell like a mix of antiseptic and detergent. More like the socks she forgot in her gym locker. Mildewy and gross. She shivered, sucking in fetid air.

Where was she? Her mind was a complete blank.

A great big nothingness.

She tried harder to focus which resulted in a searing pain at the base of her neck, another barrage of disembodied voices in her head. A merry-go-round of nameless faces and amorphous shapes.

Her mind and body exhausted from the effort, she drifted off.

Hours later she awoke, eyes adjusting to the muted light. Brain fog was dissipating, neurotransmitters beginning to fire on all cylinders, the ache in her head mostly gone. With a store of untapped energy, she moved her left leg which felt equally stiff as the right had.

There was that sound again.