

THE FRONTIER

CHAPTER 1

"I want to go with you, Les."

"You can't."

"Yes I can."

"No you can't."

"But I want to—"

"But I'm not asking."

Ray looked down at the futility of her hands. "Is it me? Is it my fault?"

"Hey—"

"It's not my fault."

"Hey, miss, *c'mon* . . ." The bartender pressed a persuasive hand onto Ray's forearm, but the gesture did nothing to rouse her. She continued to doze in front of him, her lean and fragile form pressed over the reflective surface of the bar like a reed bent over by the wind. But something remained erect, something that defied her posture and snuck through the veil of thick, black hair covering her face. "—Y'can't *sleep* here."

"I'm not sleeping," Ray said, unmoving.

The bartender pressed his hand back against his jaw, deliberating; he was tempted to just leave her there, awash in inebriation or depression or whatever it was that flattened her, but the thought of his manager forced another nudge. "Then sit up, okay? My boss is going to have a fit."

She remained motionless. The bartender glanced anxiously around the room to see if anyone else was disturbed by this young woman's decline, but on a sunny afternoon the bar was empty, short of a couple of regulars sitting near the windows, watching the harbor planes take off. They were aware of Ray's existence but did nothing to intervene, for hers was a partnership in denial, subsidized by strangers because she was just enough: not disarming enough to overwhelm nor pretty enough to produce envy, but enough of both to create curiosity and admiration. Even he had been known to finance it during her visits to this hotel, but never had he seen her like this and he paused in want of her predecessor: a woman of conspicuous spirit and blended race, who had somehow succumbed to

circumstance, leaving only this shattered likeness in her place.

"Please miss?"

The sincerity in his voiced pierced Ray's inebriation and she pushed herself up, sliding her hands down her black dress, pressing out the signs of her obvious decay.

"Y'okay?"

She nodded but gave no details, for people whose lives were intact and operable did not spend their afternoons obliterating awareness in a hotel bar. Bad enough she had to be consumed with this misery, but to say it out loud—to articulate it—was beyond her level of management. All energy was consumed instead with the re-creation of that which never existed: a functional present tense culled from movies and television, where things were happy and clean and the dialogue never bordered on the dark.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe she needed a little fresh inspiration. She nodded towards the TV screen above the bartender's head. *"Can you turn it on please?"*

He clicked on CNN. Ray's eyes locked onto a grainy image and she was immediately drawn in, an unwilling accessory. Despite its shaky format, a woman was clearly visible, her face marred with blood and debris from a bomb that had recently exploded, dust still filtering down with the innocence of falling snow. But the woman in the video was no longer innocent. Her anguish was palpable; her mouth gaped in an inaudible scream as she lay under the fragmented body of a man, struggling to free herself from his incomplete remains. She moved only with enough force to push the dead man off her, but did not release him. Tenderly she knelt beside him, sobbing as she ran her shaking hands over his torso, unable to grasp how his soul had gone while she still held his warm body in her hands.

It was a picture that played around the world and when it flashed above Ray's head, it mirrored images of her own, images that continued to plague her, despite the repeated misuse of alcohol and imagination. They had crowded into her subconscious after Les' unexpected departure months earlier and continued to grow in the absence of exposure, until their size was full and immeasurable.

Blood. There was always blood, although the wounds were never fully rendered. But Ray could feel the bruises, knew these injuries existed without evidence of their origin. They came married to fragments of memory that broke unexpectedly to the surface and left Ray grappling with their significance. Often the visuals were escorted by the distant, mechanical sound of a fist hitting a cheek or a chest or a child.

The recollections lasted a second at most but their effects lingered; days later she could still feel the sharp panic of anticipation or the sting of an unexpected assault. And sometimes—sometimes there was no violence at all; sometimes the thought of Les brought only the visceral loss of a long time love, one that left Ray with a symphony of questions.

She glanced at the screen again. The woman's face was frozen in grief, a sentiment Ray understood, if not the event that created it, for unlike the woman on TV she had not shared in the final moment of loss. Ray didn't know what had happened to Les, beyond a few arid facts and it was this that haunted her; she lowered herself to the bar again, overcome, unable to grasp how the relationship had somehow outlasted its intimacy.

The bartender watched Ray's descent and nodded towards the TV. *"Makes you sick, huh?"* He focused on the screen as the woman's contorted image was replaced by the perky face of a foreign

correspondent, who spoke with the moral clarity afforded by one who has the luxury of distance.

Ray closed her eyes and concentrated on pushing herself into a semi-erect position, posture necessary, she knew, for her next request. "Can I have another one, please?"

"Sure." The bartender turned around so she couldn't see the disproportion of tequila to water, then faced her again, drink in hand. "Where's your other half?"

". . . Couldn't make it."

The man nodded with fresh insight but said nothing. It was not his place to comment on the disintegration of other peoples' lives, merely to offer libations, so he pushed the drink towards her. "Next time, huh?"

Ray nodded, quietly filling herself with a comforting mix of blindness and bravado, poured out by the conscientious bartender. She was a pretty, thin woman of tall stature, with soft, lean curves that left nowhere for the alcohol to hide except in her bloodstream. Over the hours that followed, increased consumption came with increasing separation from fact, fact that would have reminded her that even synthetic bliss has an impending expiry date. By evening it was too late for such cognitive thought and when the bartender returned to the news above his head, she chose to focus her bleary eyes on the arrival of another patron, a man sitting two seats down.

He smiled and raised his glass. "Buy you a drink?"

Ray tried to concentrate on the specific details of his face, but they were oddly unfocused, forcing her to nod in kind towards the man's faded corduroy jacket and the beige and benign image he exported. "No thanks. I'm managing to annihilate my liver all by myself."

"Y'know, there are more interesting ways to kill yourself."

"Don't give her any ideas," the bartender said.

"Well, then how about a few suggestions for what to do with your last evening?" the man said as he humped towards her, one barstool at time.

The bartender rolled his eyes and looked back at the TV.

The corduroy man extended his hand, "I'm Philip."

Ray scowled, "Aw, c'mon . . . y'gotta pick a better name than *that*." She cocked her head to one side, as if she did not quite believe him. "How about I just call you Fred?"

"Fred?"

"Yeah. I have no memory for names and places."

Philip leaned forward, "I have a trick for that—."

"—That's okay. Retention's only necessary if you belong somewhere, but I find it gets in the way if you're just passing through. And you *are* just passing through, aren't you Fred?"

Philip looked to the bartender for assistance, but any support the man might have offered had been erased by the exploitation in Philip's pitch. Abandoned by his only available ally, Philip looked back at Ray and pleaded his case, "But Phil's easy to remember—."

Ray put one hand up, interrupting the man's right to pursue the use of his own name. "Why don't we just cut to the chase, okay? Chances are I'm never going to see you again and you're never going to see me again, and despite the quality time I've been spending with my new best friend . . ." she paused to scan the bartender's nametag, which was also strangely blurred, "Scott here, there's a good chance I'll never see him again either. So, you be Fred and he can be Scott—but only because he has a

nametag—and I'll be whoever you want, okay?"

He raised his drink. "Fred it is."

"Great. And I am . . . ?"

"Carla."

"Carla." She extended her hand, "Nice to meet you. So, what do you do, Fred?"

"I sell medical supplies. And what do you do, Carla?"

"I'm a teacher."

"Where do you teach?"

"I'm not—working—right now . . ." She was aware she was slurring and she inhaled, trying to impart control on the uncontrollable device that was now her mouth, but there it went, rattling off again, released from her innate reluctance to expose personal history by means of the glass in front of her. "I mean, I *was*—," she added, as if her past industry would make up for her sudden inability to speak, "but I had to—." She sucked in a chest full of air, forcing her next word out through a slowly controlled sigh, "stop . . ."

The word hung outside her mouth like an accusation and she felt the need to defend it, "I just—I couldn't—concentrate . . ." She took another deep breath, refueling, but realized any explanation that followed would only orate what she was trying to avoid; she closed her mouth, falling into a pit of silence.

Fred nodded as if he understood. "Problems at home, huh?"

"Yeah . . ." Ray nodded, choosing simplicity over accuracy.

"I hear ya."

"You too?" she said, genuinely pained.

"Yup." Fred looked dully into the future. "Makes you wonder why you bother."

"Why *do* you bother?"

"I don't know. Why do you?"

She sighed, forlorn. "I—I always thought it would work out, y'know? I mean, I knew there were problems, but I always thought—," she stopped, overcome.

"I'm guessing it didn't work out."

Ray shook her head and exhaled years of ineffective effort.

"Relationships, huh?" Fred chewed on the straw to his rum and Coke. "What're y'gonna do with them?"

"And what about your 'relationship'? Is it just you and someone else or do you have kids—?"

"—*She* has kids," he grimaced. "Why do you think I'm always on the road?"

"I hate being on the road."

"Not me. It's the only peace I get." He glanced back at Ray and smiled, "And y'know, occasionally you meet some interesting people."

"That you do, Fred."

"So . . . any plans tonight?"

Ray shook her head, "But I think I better do something before . . ." her voice faded as she realized that like Cinderella there was very little time separating her from the moment of humiliation.

"Before what?"

She braced herself against the surface of the bar, staring down between her hands, a significantly empty space that held only her reflection. He slid his room key towards her, filling the void. "I know something that might take the edge off."

Ray looked at the key in front of her and the promise that went with it: five minutes of glory, of warm body contact, of intimacy with someone whose name she could no longer remember, all accessible through this one little key. She pushed it around in front of her, but could not fill the vacancy between her hands with this small and innocuous piece of plastic, this symbol of disconnection at the most interior of levels. And the clock struck midnight.

She struggled to stand, "I gotta go."

The bartender smiled, pleased by her withdrawal, and passed her a small black purse. She threw it over one shoulder and immediately slumped under the weight of it.

He reached a hand out, "Y'okay?"

She forced a smile but shied away from his extended hand, cocking her shoulder with false confidence, raising the bag higher, where its weight could be distributed more evenly among the other boulders she carried there.

He slid a large black hat towards her, "Don't forget this."

Ray slapped it on her head; it immediately cast a shadow over her face and she hovered in the darkness, unsure of her destination.

The bartender pointed towards the door, "That way—."

She nodded, having more confidence in this stranger's ability to navigate her future than her own, and trotted off towards the elevator.