

CHAPTER 9

A steel gate slammed shut behind me with a clanking-metal *thud* as an officer led me through a series of chambers. It wasn't the first time I had been in a women's prison. During my final year of drinking, I'd faced a two-year sentence for another DUI. Apparently, they don't like it when you get convicted of more than one that close together.

Part of my community service involved picking up trash on the side of the freeway with fellow delinquents, but one day our supervisor drove us in the opposite direction. As we looked at each other in anticipation, he announced that we were going on a field trip. We all perked up.

"That sounds exciting," said a girl with purple hair. A large snake tattoo wrapped around her neck. "Where are we headed?"

Our supervisor chuckled. "Prison." We all perked down.

They made us wear jumpsuits similar to the ones the inmates wore inside, only ours were brightly colored and distinguishable. Later, we learned it was to prevent anyone from escaping by trying to blend in with us, as had happened in the past.

This time we were instructed to pick up litter on the prison grounds outside the fence. The prisoners lining the perimeter whooped, hollered, and cat-called us while a guard explained what

our future home was going to be like. Although it should have been terrifying, I felt nothing. The truth is, I simply didn't know how to stop drinking, so what difference did it make? If prison was where my fate took me, I accepted that.

After a long wait to be released from the last chamber, the officer led me through an outdoor area where a group of inmates were gardening in raised flowerbeds, then into another building. We arrived at a room surrounded by windows, reminding me of a human fishbowl, where guards sat at a desk just outside, observing our every move. Soon, a young Hispanic woman joined me at the table. Her bright blue eyebrows made it difficult to concentrate. I remembered the first time I saw them, when she caught me staring.

"I'm sorry," I had said then. "I don't mean to be rude."

"It's okay," Delilah replied, "they're *asombrosa*, right?"

Hmmm ... I thought. Amazing is one word for it.

She explained that during a weeklong binge and blackout she had her eyebrows permanently removed and two bright blue, jagged lightning bolts tattooed in their place as a mark of loyalty to her gang. It wasn't a case where the black ink had accidentally turned blue—these were meant to be as blue as the sky. It reminded me of some of the bad decisions I had made while in a blackout. Was I really above getting my eyebrows tattooed blue?

No, I totally would have done that.

Delilah placed two books on the table and opened one to where we'd left off last time. I was there to teach her how to stay sober, just as I had been taught. For months, I worked with a group of women in recovery, bringing meetings into prison. She was the only inmate who ever asked to meet privately to learn how I overcame my own addiction. Fresh out of a treatment facility,

Delilah had the same drive I did when I first realized that drugs and alcohol were the main contributor to all my problems.

With two young children, she faced a heartbreaking reality. She'd given birth to her youngest behind bars, but the baby was taken away shortly after. Both of her kids were being raised by their father (a reformed gang member) who had stopped bringing them to see her. Evidently, he didn't want them visiting their mother, strung out and addicted. It was her final breaking point, and Delilah was determined to stay sober, no matter how hard it was or how long it took.

We also helped women with the transition once they were released, supporting their recovery by taking them to meetings and connecting them with community resources. But Delilah wasn't getting out anytime soon. Her sentence was long, and though she never revealed the crime she committed (we were instructed never to ask), it was a short list to get the kind of time she had.

"Inches and seconds," a friend used to say in meetings. "I didn't go to prison due to only inches and seconds."

I knew exactly what he meant. When I was still drinking, I drove under the influence all the time, often colliding with parked cars. Miraculously, I just never hit one with people inside. Looking back, I can't help but imagine the shock and inconvenience I caused to those who found their damaged vehicles the next morning. Those blurry memories served as a stark reminder of my past and the life I could easily slip into if I relapsed.

I took meetings into prison because that's where I belonged. The only difference between them and me was that I got to walk through the front door. I came quite close to living a life in captivity—locked in a cage—and it felt fitting that I should work with others who were. If I ever resumed drinking, prison is likely the

best place someone like me would end up. Delilah and those blue eyebrows of hers reminded me of that every single day.

On my way home, I thought about elephants in captivity. Were locked-up humans really so different? Both had a difficult time transitioning back into the wild. Humans had to have “resources” in order to support them, especially if they’d served a significant amount of time behind bars or worse—in solitary confinement. If they didn’t have help during the transition, one of two things usually happened: they either reoffended or they died by suicide. You couldn’t just let them go to fend for themselves any more than you could simply release captive elephants into their natural habitat without guidance. Both have to be taught how to live free again.

I didn’t know of any elephants in the United States who—after any period in captivity—were returned to the wild. I wondered why when they did it all the time in Kenya. The baby elephants at the orphanage were raised by humans and hundreds had integrated seamlessly with wild elephant herds. So it *was* possible. I’d heard the excuses, like everyone else—how zoo officials claimed it was impossible, that a species once locked in a cage could never live on their own again. Although, I’m sure they were right about some cases, but not most.

The real reason, I suspected, was the old and familiar story of corruption, driven by the twin forces of money and power. It would be expensive to ship a captive elephant back to its original home, just as it had been costly to capture it in the first place. One scenario filled their pockets, the other emptied them. It was far easier to simply convince the public it could never be done.

I couldn’t imagine the cost of hiring people on another continent to hunt down and trap an elephant, keep it confined, and

force it to be completely submissive. Then, ship it thousands of miles across the ocean in a small crate, only to train it not to hate humans, perform ridiculous tricks, and be put on display. It seemed like an enormous investment, but I wondered if it was what investors called *a castle in the sky*—an overvalued stock, unjustified by the expense. How profitable could it be if most elephants in captivity died before the age of twenty, forty *years* before their natural lifespan? But I was dead wrong. Elephants, at any age, generated such high profit margins (as babies or breeders) that it mattered little when they died.

An uncomfortable anxiety crept over me as I drove. Instead of going straight home, I took a quick detour to my new gym. The old one was still full of wilted wildflowers. Exercise, meditation, and recovery meetings were all I had left to calm my nerves once alcohol and drugs were no longer an option.

My therapist taught me about “compound trauma,” which some-times affects researchers like myself. In the midst of our work, we unexpectedly encounter information that triggers our own past trauma, whether by reliving disturbing events or learning about someone else’s. So much of what I studied involved the suffering and death of elephants. My counselor believed I was indeed experiencing the effects of my chosen profession, and she also thought it explained why I continued to have horrific nightmares.

We developed a plan to help me deal with it as best I could. She didn’t want me reading or researching about elephants late at night, when support was difficult to find. The last thing I needed was to be alone in that part of my brain without someone to talk to or a meeting to attend. My homework was to spend more time with the friends I adored and to continue my exercise and meditation routines—practices that worked brilliantly.

I turned up the speed on the treadmill until my legs begged for mercy. As my pace slowed, a sense of calm washed over me, and the nervous tension that had gripped me earlier melted away. I caught sight of my reflection in the window and thought about the runners I'd seen in Kenya—their long legs and smooth physiques, like gazelles running effortlessly across the plains.

The first time I saw them was at a make-shift roadblock on a dirt road outside Voi. I heard a faint pitter-patter and just as I turned to look, four brightly colored, Nike-clad runners materialized out of nowhere, quiet and out of the ordinary. Their beauty against the backdrop of Kenya was mesmerizing.

Then I saw another group while riding on a *matatu*, a bus, in downtown Nairobi. Distracted by a traffic jam and the pulsating music blasting from the speakers, a common feature among drivers who could rival even the best DJs, a quartet suddenly glided by my open window. I leaned out to look, but like a cloud in the wind, they were gone as fast as they'd appeared.

It was no wonder the runners of Kenya dominated the sport. They had been doing so since the beginning of time. For centuries, it was how messages were sent and retrieved between villages, and in some regions, it still continues. Messengers run up to twenty miles a day, delivering important information wherever they go. When one stops to rest, another takes their place, and the cycle goes on.

One day, a group of strange men arrived at a remote village proclaiming, "The telephone, not runners, is the wave of the future." They argued there was no need for messengers when technology could do the trick.

Despite objections from the local leaders, telephone wire was laid across large stretches of the Kenyan countryside. When the

time came to collect payment for the phones—most of which were never installed—the village leaders laughed, since they had no more use of a hard-wired phone than a Chanel suit. Then things got ugly.

The corrupt telephone scheme was eventually exposed as the scandal it was. That may have been the end of that story had poachers not seized on a new opportunity that literally fell right into their laps. Hundreds of miles of unused wire—free for the taking—to use as snares, dropped at their feet. It was collected, cut, twisted, shaped, and formed as a noose to catch, kill, and entangle animals of every size imaginable. And the destruction of wildlife across Kenya began on a scale so massive it was practically commercial.

I turned the treadmill off. It was so depressing I didn't want to think about it anymore. I wiped my machine down and headed to the locker room when something just outside the entrance door caught my attention. Hanging on the wall was a fuzzy, black-and-white photograph. It showed a shirtless man with huge muscles holding what looked like a machine gun, standing next to a tiny, living, furry baby elephant. I stepped closer to get a better look. The caption read, "Nautilus, Inc. founder Arthur Jones, with two of his greatest passions: guns and elephants."

The name wasn't familiar, but I was determined to find out more. I walked over to the front desk.

"Excuse me," I said, pointing. "Do you know how long that picture has been there?"

"Forever, if I had to guess." The young man shrugged.

"I've never seen it before. Are you sure someone didn't put it up recently?"

"Nah ... it's been there for years."

How had I never noticed it before? I had gone to that gym and worked out daily since I'd joined months earlier. I must have walked right past it countless times. It felt like an extraordinary clue, whispering to me out of nowhere. As I turned and looked around, every workout machine had a picture of a nautilus shell, a logo, blazed across its side. It was not something I had ever paid particular attention to before. Now, they all seemed to glow while the room darkened—illuminated only by a sea of those shells.

This was it.

Without changing out of my gym clothes or even taking a shower, I grabbed my things and ran across the street to the library, eager to reach the nearest computer, convinced that this was the sign I had been searching for.