

LOCKED DOORS

by **BLAKE CROUCH**

CHAPTER 18

Upon regaining consciousness, Karen's first thought was that she was no longer in the trunk. Though she couldn't see, her present blindness owed to the blindfold tied around her head. She felt a cold wind in her face and an erratic source of light struggled through the oily-smelling cloth that masked her eyes.

Karen did not remember being moved. For all she knew she was dreaming again though the chill metal against her cheek seemed convincingly real. She tried to move but could not, her hands and feet now bound with thick rope. The numbing grogginess of thirst weighed down her head.

Footsteps approached, the tip of a boot now inches from her face. She smelled the grass and dirt that clung to it—raw and earthy.

“You're conscious, I see.”

The voice contained no reverberation. She was outside.

“Where am I? Please take off the blindfold.”

“We better leave that on for now. I tell you, you're a heavy gal. If I sound winded, it's because I just carried you up two hundred fourteen steps.”

A prickling crawled through Karen's spine. “Where is this?” she asked.

“Don't you see the light? Even through the blindfold I don't know how you could miss it.”

“I don't under—”

“That light is magnified by a First Order Fresnel Lens, operational since October First, Eighteen Seventy-two. Karen, let me quell your fear.” The man sat down beside her. “I brought you here to let you go.” Karen began to cry, filling with the purest relief. “But I have to hold on to the Widow Lancing. You remember her from the trunk?”

“Yessir.”

“See, the only reason you're being released is because I flipped a coin. You were heads, it landed on heads, you get to live.”

“Why are you doing this?”

She smelled his lemony breath in her face and his words came very even and very quiet.

“You think this is all about you you arrogant twat?”

“No, I—”

“I only took you and Elizabeth Lancing to get someone's attention. Can you guess who it is?”

“I don't know.”

“You should know. You've fucked him. Well, I'm just making an assumption there but—”

“I don't know who you're—”

“Andrew Thomas.”

“What do you want with him?”

“Seven years ago, Andrew shot me, left me to die in a snowy desert.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t be. What I’ve got planned for him is going to make it all worthwhile. One last thing. Think hard before you answer. Do you believe you’re an evil person?”

“No, I’m—”

“Why not?”

Her captor’s breath warmed her mouth as she thought of all the charitable acts she’d performed in the last year—Wednesdays in the soup kitchen on 54th, the new writers she’d guided to publication, the angel tree at Ice Blink.

“I’m a decent person,” she said.

“And me? From what little you’ve seen. Am I evil?”

“No sir. I don’t believe you are. I don’t know you. I don’t know what sort of parents you come from. I don’t know if tragedies have happened to you. I’m sure things have caused you to behave...”

“Destructively.”

“Yes.”

“Is anyone evil, Karen?”

“People get damaged. They malfunction. But no, I don’t believe in evil.”

“I see. Thank you for talking so candidly with me.”

The blindfold was removed.

Karen stared through iron bars across a half mile of pines and marshland and dunes to the Atlantic. From this height and distance the ocean was mute though in the light of the yellow moon she could make out the ragged thread of surf extending for miles down the coastline.

Her captor was gone.

She managed to sit up and saw that she occupied a small observation deck encircled by iron railing. At her back a ladder climbed the last six feet of the tower up to the lantern room of the Bodie Island Lighthouse.

Its beam was blinding. It flashed on for 2.5 seconds. Off 2.5 seconds. On 2.5 seconds. Off 22.5 seconds. This rhythm repeated, dusk to dawn, and she could not behold the mighty lens as it magnified its 160,000 candlepower beacon out to sea.

Karen strained against the rope but the knots held. As she dragged herself around the platform, her eyes followed the ribbon of Highway 12 as it skirted beach and marsh and finally, three miles south, traversed the troubled waters of Oregon Inlet onto Pea Island. From there it would be sixty miles of desolate sound and seashore and tiny beach communities and then Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke and the Core Banks.

But she didn’t know place-names.

She didn’t even know she was in North Carolina or that her captor had cut two locks with a bolt cutter in the oil room and carried her up a rickety spiral staircase to the top of this 131-year-old lighthouse.

How the hell am I gonna get down from here? Fuck it, I’ll find a way. Flag down a car. Get to an airport. Call Scott Boylin, have him wire some money. It will feel so sweet to be back in my apartment again. First thing I’ll do is listen to Ashley Chambliss and drink an entire bottle of that chardonnay and I won’t even feel guilty about it. Everything will be different now. I’ll be a better person. Publish better books. Stop living on autopilot. This experience might actually turn out to be a—

Rounding the base of the lantern room, she froze.

Oh God, why is he still here and squatting over a pile of rope?

The man with long black hair looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Be right with you, Karen.”

When he turned and stood she saw that he held a noose by its coil.

He came forward as she tried to crawl the other way and slipped the noose around her neck. Then he hoisted her up over his shoulder and set her down on top of the railing facing him.

Unable to muster a scream, Karen glanced over her shoulder, felt a needling in her stomach. Far below she saw the adjoining oil room at the granite foundation of the lighthouse. She saw the roof of the nearby Keeper’s Quarters and the visitor parking lot. Westward beyond the marsh, she took in the waters of the Pamlico Sound and further on, the blinking red lights of radio towers on the mainland.

“This is a black and white banded lighthouse,” the man said. “I’ve measured out the rope so you’ll hang in the middle white band facing the visitor’s center. Imagine the face of whoever finds you first. Maybe some minivan family from the Midwest, with lots of little ones.”

He laughed.

Karen looked at the skein of climbing rope at his feet and the bulky knot he’d tied to the railing. He held her by the waist belt of the bathrobe she’d worn since her abduction.

She sought out reason in his eyes and found it. They were not wild or impassioned but black and serene. And if they burned, it was a smoldering like embers.

Now only clutching her with one hand, he brushed his black hair from his eyes.

Karen felt gravity pining for her, a waterless undertow.

She upchucked on his windbreaker but he did not let go.

“Karen,” he said. “Now do you believe?”

He released the belt of her robe, watched her fall.

She screamed for two seconds, then the rope silenced her.

Back and forth she swung, still fifty feet above the lawn, a pendulum for the lighthouse.