

# Escape

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**A**LICE DESPERATELY needed to escape. She just didn't know it yet.

She had not taken time away from the Columbia Art Museum in the nearly three years since she was hired into Acquisitions. Holed up in the basement of the museum, she personally catalogued each new piece.

Columbia had coaxed her away from the Art Institute of Chicago with promises of warmer weather and more influence over exhibits. A moving service had been sent to pack up Alice's life and brought her to the temperate South Carolina city.

May was the thirty-fourth month of Alice's contract. The curator, Judy, was impressed with her diligence. The museum had developed and grown consistently since Alice's arrival. Benefactors and investors remained generous.

It was ten-thirty on a Friday night when Alice made a call to Judy from the museum. She was reorganizing the newest show in the basement vault and had a nagging doubt.

"I'm thinking we need to space the portraits throughout the exhibit," she said. "The way we have it now will take away the effect of each..."

"Alice? What in God's name are you doing?" asked Judy.

"It occurred to me that I have the presentation laid out all wrong."

"And this couldn't wait until Monday? The show doesn't start for another three weeks."

"I can get more done when I'm alone."

"Alice, as your friend, I'm telling you 'Go home.'"

"But I'm already here, and I think I can get the exhibit better arranged."

“I’m sure that you can. Now, as your boss, I’m telling you ‘Go home.’”

“Judy...”

“I’ll see you Monday, Alice.”



MONDAY MORNING, Judy called Alice into her office.

“Alice, I hope you know how much you are appreciated here. How indispensable you’ve become. And it is with the best of intentions, that I’m telling you this. Go away. Get out of that dreadful basement.”

Judy looked at Alice’s face, pale from months in the vault. “I have a cottage on the beach in Surfside, just south of Myrtle Beach. I’m ordering you to get the hell out of here for a week. Go down there and relax.”

“I really don’t have the time...”

“Yes, you do, and this isn’t a matter for discussion. Go.”



THE BEACH HOUSE STOOD on stilts. Alice parked her LeBaron convertible underneath and lugged her bags up the broad, white front steps.

The inside was light and airy. White-painted wicker and bamboo furniture sat on the terracotta tile floor. Gauzy curtains filtered the coastal sun.

Alice set the last of her luggage near the door and began to investigate. On the far wall a broad expanse of French doors framed the blue Atlantic Ocean. She opened the doors wide and heard the sloshing roar of the surf. It was a beautiful view. No hotels or resorts within eyesight. Only the Surfside Pier jutted out into the ocean.

Four pelicans flew over the dune between the cottage and the beach. A few walkers picked up shells as they made their way up the sand.

Alice felt a sense of calm, the first since moving to the South—the first inkling of joy since watching the Fourth of July fireworks from the top of the Hancock building in Chicago. She had looked down on the display as she leaned her body back against...

She shook her head to clear the image. Thoughts like that most definitely would not lead to any form of inner peace.

She looked beyond the cottage. The part of her that used to run wild wanted to jump across the dune that separated her from the ocean and plunge into the surf. Instead, she left the door open to fill the space with the smell of salty air. She picked up a bag and made her way up the stairs. The master suite faced the surf. More French doors led to the broad deck outside. She opened them to let in the balmy heat and the crashing sound of the surf. A smaller set of doors led to the expansive bathroom.

The space was filled with warm salt air. In early May, the coast was hot during the day and temperate at night. For many years, she had to cope with the cold winters of Chicago, and recently she had lived like a mole at the museum. The close heat of the Carolina shore embraced her. She preferred to perspire in the warmth than to turn up the air-conditioning.

In the bathroom, Alice created her own spa. Her craving for a decent bath had forced her to bring quite an array of toiletries which she arranged on the vanity. She decorated the edges of the large tub with glass bottles of blue and amber, filled with oils and salts, lit a musky incense stick, and left the room.

She unpacked her clothes into the dresser and closet. Her wardrobe consisted of sensible clothing and one bathing suit purchased at the last minute. Back downstairs again, she opened the rest of the windows, slipped through the front door, and left.



MONDAY' S TRIP to the Food Lion gave her vodka, tonic, limes and bags of specialty foods. She planned to cook the type of meals that she never had time for in Columbia. By the time she returned to the cottage, she felt slightly more confident in her surroundings.

She shifted around the light living room furniture to better look over the beach, and lit the musk incense in every room. She hadn't fully been at ease since the time in Chicago with Stacy. It was four years ago. Alice couldn't seem to remember how to relax, how to rejoice, or how to regain her sense of self.

She mixed a stout cocktail and was lured outside by the sounds of the ocean and sea birds. She stepped onto the deck and took in the infinity of the ocean. It occurred to her that, maybe, she was ready to move on.

The beach was speckled with people and the occasional umbrella. Alice spent her first evening watching the beachcombers and drinking one vodka-tonic after another.

Twilight passed and a waxing moon rose. In her drunken, delirious state, Alice focused on the beauty of the black ocean with its moonlit spray. She moved upstairs to the bedroom and made her way out onto the upper deck. The sky had never been as expansive as when it blended with the great unknown ocean. On the beach, the walkers continued on their ways. Always couples. They held hands and were in obvious harmony. It became too much for Alice.

She slipped through the door to her room and peeled off her sweaty shorts and tank top. She tossed them onto the round chair that served as a hamper. She wore no bra. There was little point unless she was trying to fill out a dress. She slipped out of her bikini panties and made her way to the bath.

The sink faced the outside wall, and a square window separated the two vanity mirrors. Through it, the night sky shone. She filled the tub, doused the water with patchouli oil and some softening salts, turned back to the mirror, and took herself in. The past three years, busy with the museum, had not provided the luxury of self-examination. At forty-seven, most people would take her for her early thirties. Her petite frame and pixie-blond hair made her look youthful.

Her breasts were delicate, but her bottom was round and full and would scream profanities if it could. It was a powerful ass with its own agenda. Unfortunately, Alice's insecurities overwhelmed her ass's declarations every time.

She set Van Morrison spinning on the CD player in the bedroom. Bathing, she scrubbed and polished every surface of skin. She and a good friend had once declared, "Shave everything from the neck down. And pluck thereafter." Body hair annoyed her, whether or not there was anyone to share its absence. Her skin

scented and smooth, she stepped from the tub, towel-dried her hair, and set to oiling her limbs.

She wrapped herself in her short blue kimono and fetched herself a cocktail. She turned up her music and stepped onto the deck. The rush of the ocean spoke to her on some basic level. Standing against the rail, looking over the sand and water, Alice felt that surprising sense of peace yet again.

Even the people that walked the beach made sense to her. Each had their own story in the great scheme of things. Alice drank and created tales. The older couple were newly married—a second time for him, the third for her. The young man with his Lab would climb into his Jeep Wrangler and meet his pretty girlfriend who he hoped wasn't pregnant. The teens that ran into the surf, they were easy.

It was the woman in the long, straight, black skirt that was out of place. Wearing a minuscule black tank top and holding her skirt above the rush of the waves, she seemed enchanted. Ghostly in some dark way. Black, curly hair blew around her shoulders as she walked in the surf.

Alice forgot about the other walkers and tried to imagine this woman's story. She couldn't shake the concept that the woman was simply a figment of her imagination, a drunken trick of her mind. She felt a strange compulsion to call out to the woman. She imagined inviting her up to her bed and being reminded of how a woman felt.

Maybe she was getting better.

The woman glided on bare feet to the beach access walk and disappeared into the public parking lot.

Alice stared into the grassy dune where her mystery woman had evaporated. She lifted her hand to throat and slid it over her collarbone to the slight swell of her breast. She had not felt the need to pleasure herself for a long time. Her nipple tightened in her palm.

Alice sat in the deck chair and opened her robe to the night. The salt air caressed her exposed belly and sharpened her need. Her hand drifted down to her cunt and pressed into her smooth, full folds. Her fingers found her tight clit. She slipped her fingers farther and moistened them with her fluids, brought them back to her clit, and began the circular massage that would bring her climax.

While other residents of Surfside picked shells, she rubbed herself through the waves of pleasure

Inside, she slipped into bed with the windows open. The sound of waves crashed the beach and lulled her into a hard sleep. Her last waking thought was that the next day she would buy herself a vibrator.



ALICE WAS QUITE SURE it was a mortal sin to sunbathe. If not closely tied to the Seven Deadly Sins, it was possibly a venial transgression. At the very least, serious sun screen had to be used to avoid the fall of your everlasting soul. God forbid you lie in the sun. It's a sure, straight shot to hell.

Her porcelain-skinned mother had cursed her daughter for any sun-worshipping. Yet, here, filled with a sense of rebellion, Alice wandered over to the Sandman's beach store. She bought deep browning oil and bottles of aloe vera body wash and gel for the burn she was sure she'd get.

She slipped into her yellow bikini, made her way down to the beach, lay in her canvas lawn chair with nearby umbrella, and felt her body warmed by the Carolina sun. Stretched out in the heat, she anointed her pale skin with the oil.

The wind whipped along the beach, and her skin was assaulted by the rays and the blowing sand. By lunchtime, her flesh was protesting, and Alice skipped up the steps to the beach house.

Inside, she prepared one of her exaggerated bath rituals. The bath gel made her feel clean and new as it swept the suntan oil and ocean salt from her skin. She loved it. It had a scent unlike anything she had at home.

Looking in the mirror, she was pleased with her new tan lines and the glow on her face. It was Tuesday and she had plenty of time to get more. She tousled her hair, applied pink lip gloss, and put on her only sun-dress. Downstairs, she slipped into some sandals and set out in her convertible for a sex shop she'd seen advertised in the local tourist paper. In her resurfacing liberation, she'd be damned if she wasn't having a new toy.



APHRODITE'S WAS a sliver's width of a store, properly packed with a candy-store collection of toys. A life-size forearm and hand greeted Alice as she wandered past the anal beads towards a wall of dildos and vibrators.

"I'll be right out," came a woman's voice from the open door in the back of the store. "Make yourself at home."

Alice desperately wanted to ask if that included lifting her skirt and test-driving the merchandise. Laughing to herself, she took in the sizes, shapes and colors of her choices.

"Can I help you find something specific?" said the voice directly behind her.

Alice turned. "I'm pretty sure..."

Dear God. It was the woman from the beach. Her bright smile and sharp blue-green eyes rattled Alice. She fought to recover. She took a deep, calming breath, summoned her innate courage and said, "I'm desperate for something to play with." She reminded herself that she was a woman of the world and could handle this. "I'm thinking 'vibrator.' But I hate these hard, plastic things."

"Then you need to come over here. This is where we keep the staff recommendations."

The woman turned towards the back and motioned for Alice to follow. The figment of Alice's imagination was entirely real. She wore a full, black gypsy skirt that dragged the ground, and a black halter top that exposed her back. It was adorned with a very large tribal tattoo. As she walked, her bare feet peeked from beneath her skirt and her head of curls swayed around her shoulders. Alice used the short walk to compose herself.

"You won't find anything over here that runs on less than two Cs. We're serious about our power."

"I'm sorry. I just can't talk toys with someone I don't know," said Alice. She offered her hand. "I'm Alice."

"I'm Keeran. Nice to meet you." She smiled a broad smile and shook Alice's hand.

“So, what do you recommend?”

“It’d have to be the Pink Torpedo.” She laughed. “Aren’t these names awful?”

She handed Alice the ‘life-like’ pink latex vibrator.

“It takes two Cs and has three settings. I love mine.”

“It looks like it will do nicely. I’ll take it.”

At the checkout, Keeran asked, “Are you here on vacation? Or did we all get lucky and you moved here?”

“I’m staying down in Surfside. A week. I . . . I’m here for a week.”

“Oh, I love Surfside. I like to go there to get away from the tourists and the high rises.”

“You should come by my cottage,” said Alice. “I mean, I’m always there.”

“Unless you’re shopping for dildos?” laughed Keeran as she wrapped up the pink purchase.

“Yeah, except for then. I’m on South Seaside any other time.”

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and see you,” said Keeran. “You never know.”



BACK AT THE SURFSIDE HOUSE, Alice danced around the kitchen to the Allman Brothers. Nothing would come of it, but she had been bold again. She had flirted for the first time in recent history. She could do this.

She sautéed shrimp, boiled angel-hair pasta, and blended a soft sauce of garlic, basil and tomato. She took a plateful of pasta to the lower deck and watched the couples cross the sand.

“This is not impossible,” she thought.

After eating, she mixed up a cocktail in a plastic tumbler and made her way to the beach. Twilight lit the surf. The lights of the pier were an invitation to take a walk.

Alice knew she was getting past Stacy. She had indulged the tortuous thoughts for too long. Tonight she would purge. Each yard walked towards the pier became a thought that needed to go. How Stacy looked and felt. How bold she made Alice feel. How she made breakfast every Sunday morning, and how she led a lesbian support group every third Thursday. How she was strong and focused. And, how Alice just wasn't 'gay enough' and was too busy with her own life to support the cause.

Alice stopped in the sand, and for the first time, realized that Stacy wanted her to be someone else. Not necessarily militant, but most definitely less femme. Alice took stock of herself. Her short, painted nails, her tousled Meg Ryan blonde hair, her little blue sun-dress. She had never questioned herself more than when she was fighting with Stacy. There were times that Stacy almost had Alice convinced that it took more than loving women to be a dyke.

The offer from the Columbia Art Museum coincided with Stacy introducing Dru to Alice. Dru was a full-on butch new to Chicago. Stacy was thrilled with the ideas that Dru had brought from her work with lesbian groups in New York. Dru became part of everything.

Like a guardian angel, the Museum had flown in and started to woo Alice at about the same time. They spent a week praising her talents, strengths and accomplishments. It became very clear that it was not an interview, but a chance for the Museum to steal her from Chicago. By the time they'd finished, she felt valued and ready to move on. Back in Chicago, Stacy didn't beg her to stay. She didn't even try. Alice put a travel bag in her convertible and drove off. Chicago and Stacy melted in the rear-view mirror.

Alice shook her head and looked out over the blue-black Atlantic Ocean. If she could have vomited up the bile of Stacy, she would have. Instead, she felt clear. The surf washed over her feet, and she felt the smooth edges of shells beneath her feet.

Release. Escape. Alice smiled in the growing darkness, drank the last of her cocktail, and ran into the waves. The waves rolled in around her waist and then up to her neck. She lifted her legs and floated in on the surf.

The natural ease of full abandon filled Alice as she dipped under the sea. In her peace, she felt the undertow grab her ankles. Startled, Alice paddled her way to

the beach and stood up for a brief moment before losing her balance. Soaked through, she plopped her full bottom into the wet sand with a laugh.

“Is this the way you enjoy the ocean?” Alice lay back on the sand in drunken, released, happy abandon. She was shaken to find her black-skirted Irish maid smiling down on her. “You’re just a bit away from Seaside. How’s a girl supposed to find you?” asked Keeran.

Renewed, Alice smiled. “This is the best place I’ve been for years.”

Keeran helped her out of the suctioning sand and they made their way back to the beach house. As they passed the public walkway Keeran asked if she could move her car to Alice’s cottage.

“217. You can park underneath.” Keeran strolled towards the public parking.

With Keeran out of sight, Alice rushed into the cottage, peeled off her soaking dress and slipped on a T-shirt and jean shorts. She hurried downstairs to wait on the front porch for her nymph. A silver, late-model muscle-car glided into the space behind Alice’s LeBaron. The rumble of the car’s exhaust vibrated Alice in deep places that she had forgotten. Keeran lifted her full skirts as she climbed the steps.

“That’s a hell of a car,” said Alice.

Keeran looked back and said easily, “It’s a friend’s.”

Alice did not prod. “Would you like a drink? I have vodka-tonics.”

“How about vodka straight with some ice?” Keeran’s bright eyes flashed. Such pale skin for the environment. Black, curly hair. Perfect teeth in a broad, confident, unnerving smile.

“Vodka rocks?”

“Yes, please.”

Keeran looked around the cottage and smiled again as she came to the big, open doors. “Isn’t that the most heavenly thing you’ve ever seen?” she asked.

Alice looked at her silhouette, framed by the moonlight. Mercy.

Baiting Keeran with the cocktail, Alice led the way to the lower deck.

For a quiet moment, the women sat in the magic of the South Carolina night. The star-speckled sky looked down on them.

“Would you like...”

“What about...”

Both women laughed.

“The view is better from upstairs.”

They made it up the stairs. Alice led Keeran to the upper deck. They sat in the deck chairs and took in the beauty of the night sky flowing into the ocean. The surf crashed. A few remaining gulls swept by.

Alice looked at her companion. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“I’m almost twice your age.”

Keeran smiled her broad smile and said, “I guess that’s twice the experience then.”

“Don’t you have someone here?” Alice asked.

“I’ve been dating Shelly for the last couple of months. That’s her car downstairs.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“I guess. She lets me drive her baby.”

“Do you both still see other people?”

“I... I don’t know if she does. Shelly had a situation with a girl in Louisville. But that was months ago.”

“What about you?” Alice asked.

“You’re the first woman I’ve been alone with since starting up with Shelly.”

“So why isn’t she your girlfriend?”

“Shelly works on cars all day long and then bartends at Illusions every night. I hardly see her. We...”

“Fuck?” asked Alice.

“I guess so.”

Alice pulled her chair closer to Keeran and ran the back of her hand up the young woman’s arm. “Are you open to other ... experiences?” she asked, and then met Alice’s kiss halfway across her chair. Alice plunged her hands into the mass of Keeran’s curls and pressed against her lips.

“For all anyone else knows, you’re not even here. You’re walking the beach,” whispered Alice.

Glancing at the ocean, Keeran brightened. “I am on the beach,” she said, and took Alice’s hand. She pulled her down the stairs, across the dune, and onto the wet sand of the beach.

Only locals would be out that time of night, and that included the man with his dog half a mile down the coast.

Alice and Keeran tore at each other. Alice’s T-shirt and shorts landed on the sand with Keeran’s gypsy skirt.

Alice and Keeran crashed together in the night waves. The floating weightlessness rubbed their breasts together. Slick arms wrapped around and legs became tangled. Alice twisted Keeran against her and reached between her young trim thighs to grasp her exposed pussy. Keeran moaned and arched into her hand.

Alice fought through the strong wet of the surf into the soft wet of Keeran. Slick, viscous, hot. She plunged two fingers into Keeran’s cunt. Keeran grasped her around the neck and writhed with pleasure. Her hands slid over Alice’s skin and pulled her closer. Alice found Keeran’s clit and jerked it off between her fingers. The exotic young woman under her hands wriggled and squirmed. Alice was rewarded with small cries and low moans.

Their breath grew ragged. Keeran pulled Alice into a fierce kiss. Breasts pressed together and Alice felt the taut young nipples against her own. The feeling drove

Alice to increased intensity. With a primordial cry, Keeran grabbed Alice's neck and came in a fierce flood.



LATER, they sat on the upper deck in blissful distraction.

"You're my first in almost four years," admitted Alice.

"Four *years*?"

Alice told Keeran the story. Stacy, Columbia, the museum, the whole nine yards.

"I'm only here until Sunday. I don't expect anything," Alice said.

"That gives us five days of fun," said Keeran.

Alice turned to the bedroom behind her. "Would you like to stay tonight?"

"Shelly would kill me. I try to be home before she gets off work."

"I'll see you again tomorrow then?"

"Oh, yes!"



KEERAN SPENT HER DAYS working at Aphrodite's. Alice used the time to soak in the sun. The threatening sunburn would send her inside to plan for the evening.

Trips to Barefoot Landing and Broadway at the Beach garnered short, full skirts and snug tank-tops. A shop with beautiful silver jewelry from Denmark seemed decadent. Alice adorned herself with silver drop earrings and a hinged bracelet.

She set out on a mission to the market—luxurious groceries of lean steak and artichokes, chicken breasts and asparagus, or cheese-filled pastas in a rich meat sauce .

Every evening, she listened for the rumble of Keeran's borrowed ride. She would be deeply involved in the meal as Keeran poked her head through the beach cottage door. By the second evening, both were giddy with playing house.

"How was your day, baby?" asked Alice.

"Evidently there is a growing need for penis-pumps. I sold three today." Keeran walked over and wrapped her arms around Alice. "What's for dinner?"

"Have you ever eaten a whole artichoke? It's a matter of skinning the leaves and tearing the meat off with your teeth."

"Sounds vicious," said Keeran.

"Only if it's done right," laughed Alice.

Alice and Keeran spend the evenings eating exotic food and drinking straight. They spent nights roaming the beach.

And fucking. They spent their nights fucking.

"What if you came to Columbia?" asked Alice on Thursday.

Keeran laughed. "And leave my sex toys and life of uncertainty behind? You must be crazy!"



WITH THE SCREEN DOOR OPEN to the night surf, Alice and Keeran indulged each others' bodies. And planned for what might lie ahead.

"You should meet Shelly." Keeran ran her hand over Alice's chest and gently squeezed her breast.

"Yes, I think I should." Whatever happened then, Alice would be ready. "Invite her for dinner on Saturday night."

"But that's our last night!"

Alice kissed the younger woman. "Maybe not."

"Really?"

“Really. Now, let’s not waste tonight.” Alice grinned and reached for the Pink Torpedo.



ALICE DROVE down the coast to Murrell’s Inlet for fresh seafood. The local grocery provided greens and potatoes. On her way back, she flew through the small community and brought her selections to the beach house. Jane’s Addiction flowed from the CD player. She took a refreshing bath of aloe and oil. Clean hair and soft body. Dressed in a low-slung skirt and white oxford tied up around her tiny waist, she danced through the completion of her meal. Once everything was ready, she took the steaks to the grill under the cottage stilts and waited for her guests.

A deep rumble filled the tiny beach community. She forced herself to look at the steaks and nothing else. In her peripheral vision, she saw the silver hot rod glide into the space next to her car. She pretended to not be affected and only looked up as Keeran called her name.

Face firm, Alice turned to her and smiled a gracious smile. “You’re just in time.”

Keeran was dressed in one of her all-black ensembles—black leather pants and a stretch top. “Thanks for having us over.”

The woman who must be Shelly stepped out of the car and surveyed her surroundings. She was tall with long, blonde hair and a trim build. She dominated her environment.

Keeran rushed to Alice and hugged her firmly. She turned to Shelly. “Hon, this is Alice.”

Shelly sidled up in her tight blue jeans and snug T-shirt and smiled a cautious smile. She offered her hand, “I’m Shelly.”

“Alice.”

Alice plucked up the finished steaks and said, “Everyone upstairs.”

In the open dining room, the women began to relax with the introduction of alcohol. Alice finished cooking the meal and presented white plates full of food.

The women enjoyed the luxurious food and wine over several hours. By the end of the meal, all three were laughing in a strange understanding.

“So, Alice,” Shelly said, “Keeran tells me you two met up at Aphrodite’s. A girl can get pretty lonely all by herself. You have to have some kind of entertainment.”

“Luckily, Keeran had everything I needed.” It was an allusion that was not lost on Shelly. Alice knew she was dealing with a sharp woman. The unexpressed knowledge crowded around them.

Alice gathered her bearings, sat straighter in her chair and fixed her eyes on the beautiful blonde across the table. “May I ask what your intentions are with our dear Keeran?”

Shelly met her gaze. She laughed, “My intentions are to enjoy her, thoroughly, and see what happens from there.”

“Do you love her?”

“I might.”

“Do you love her enough to not let her go?”

“What?”

“Alice,” Keeran begged. “Not now.”

“Do you love her enough to keep her here with you?”

Shelly pushed back her chair and stood. “Look doll, I don’t know what the fuck you’re trying here.”

Alice stood up behind Keeran, her lover of one week, her epiphany to a new life. “I’m giving you the chance to make a decision,” she said.

“Keeran?” Shelly asked.

Keeran looked at Alice, and then back to Shelly. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I’m leaving with Alice tomorrow.”

Shelly took a deep breath. “I’m sorry too. I’m sorry that I work too damn much, and that you had to fuck a tourist.”

She stormed through the front door and slammed it behind her. The surf crashed outside the back door as the powerful motor roared from below. The massive

engine of the silver monster drowned out everything else. Shelly peeled onto the road, lit the tires up and screamed off into the night.



SUNDAY MORNING, Alice drove into South Myrtle Beach to pick up Keeran. With Alice's vacation baggage, the LeBaron barely held the young woman's two Army bags. Keeran cradled her cat, Buddha, in the front seat as they headed out over the 501 to Columbia.