

LOCKED IN A BoX

A KATE O'DADE MYSTERY NOVEL

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Redwood
Publishing

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Published by
Redwood Publishing, LLC (Orange County, CA)
www.redwooddigitalpublishing.com

ISBN: 978-1-966333-31-9 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-1-966333-33-3 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-966333-32-6 (e-book)

Cover Design: Ghislain Viau, Creative Book Publishing
Interior Formatting: JBookDesigns

PART I

BOXES

*Out of the box came misery, out came death,
out came sadness, all shaped
like tiny buzzing moths [that] stung Pandora over and over again . . .*

— P A N D O R A ' S B O X —

CHAPTER 1

La Jolla, California, 2009

The day I fell out of the sky, I landed at the scene of my father's death. The wind was too strong for paragliding that afternoon, but fierce winds never stopped a hotshot like me. This day, April 10, always brought trouble. But instead of cocooning in the refuge of home or my therapy office, I was running toward the edge of Torrey Pines Bluff, exhilarated and terrified. Would I plummet into the sea three hundred feet below?

At the brink, I leapt into space, my yellow wing sweeping me way up into the air.

Hallelujah, I can fly!

Turning south, I rode the ridge lift along the sandstone bluffs whiskered with dark green patches of chaparral. No longer Dr. Kate O'Dade, the gray-suited psychologist, I was an exotic, yellow-winged bird soaring in the sky. The wind gusted, and a cold blast knocked me sideways. Even in Southern California, April was the cruelest month, and this day—the anniversary of my father's death—always felt the harshest.

The sky darkened, the gusts stronger. I sensed a storm coming. Or my thunder-voiced father—his restless ghost haunting me still. I could hear the rumble of his deep baritone in the roar of the wind. Would I never be free of him? Except for the dark thrill of his world-famous voice, I'd managed to forget almost everything about him.

A sudden gust slammed into my wing, and the glider began to spin out of control.

Focus. Hands steady on the controls. Increase speed.

Raising the control toggles, I zoomed higher, and a strong lift sent me soaring way up. Below, the ocean spread out like a giant sheet of metal. The sky was turning an ominous gray. I glanced overhead. *Holy Mother of God!* A monster cumulus cloud loomed right above my wing, sucking me into the swirling mist. In moments, I'd be a ragdoll, tossed around, blinded. I plunged into steep spiral turns. The icy air whipped around me, tore at my jacket, and numbed my hands. Spiraling faster, I lost my bearings, sky and sea merging, a blur of gray-white light.

Slow your turns. My hands froze on the controls.

Whirling down. Seconds to impact, the crash fatal on water-turned-rock.

Stop the spiral!

Which control, left or right? Total confusion, the slate sea rushing up. On pure instinct, I eased up on the left control toggle and the spiral slowed, slower . . . stopped, the world still reeling in my head. Water everywhere and my mouth dry as the desert.

Sinking fast. Gliding close to the water, I angled toward the shore, feet skimming the waves. I laser-focused on a patch of beach, willed more speed. It would be close. "One, two, three, four," then my feet hit the wet sand.

I slipped out of my harness and packed my gear, wired on adrenaline. I'd beaten the death spiral. I was invincible. The triumph fueled my hike halfway up the bluff steps, then sudden spasms of shaking forced me to sit. The sea surged below. I imagined my body crashing, shrouded in yellow, the sharks circling. Blocking out this scene, I checked my watch. Plenty of time until I was due back at my office at four-thirty. I resumed climbing, mad at myself for freezing in the spiral. Something more than fear had disabled me. What the hell was it?

One step from the top, a nightmare image shot up from the deep—my father crumpled on his dressing room floor wearing a toreador's costume, his head in a pool of blood. I froze. Was this a buried memory of his dead body?

—

The brass elevator doors were almost closed when a pale, manicured hand reached in and gripped one door. I jabbed the Open button, and a tall blond slipped through the opening. Two beefy men in suits followed, then a busty matron swathed in pink velour. The doors rumbled shut, and I stifled a gasp, my chest a block of cement. Nine hundred pounds of air-sucking flesh packed in a five-by-seven-foot box. I always took the stairs, but today, I found the stairwell locked. I was a daredevil in the sky, but trap me in an elevator, and I could die of fright.

"Second floor," said the suit behind me, spewing garlic breath. No other requests. I punched 2 and then number 7 for my floor at the top. The decrepit car creaked into motion like an old, arthritic man lurching from his recliner. My pulse quickened. I tracked every jerk and gut-rolling sway.

At the second floor, the elevator rattled to a stop and the bodies fled.

The car staggered upward. I stepped back, surprised to see the blond still standing in the corner across from me. Her furtive glance triggered a sense of *déjà vu*. Had we met before? I didn't think so, but I felt an instant visceral dislike. She looked like a snooty fashion plate, her hair precision-cut in an asymmetrical bob. A gold blouse shimmered under her tapestry vest and a matching tapestry purse hung from her shoulder, an artsy getup from a pricy boutique. Her lips pursed as she eyed my out-of-style gray pantsuit and windblown auburn curls.

Silently picking on Fashion Plate kept me sane on the crawl to the third floor. Then my perceptions warped—the fake walnut walls creeping in, the ceiling pressing down, the floor a magnified chessboard of black and white tiles. I stood stiffly on a white square; the blond's gold

sandals gleamed on a black square. She shot a sidelong glance. I countered with a stony stare.

The ding sounded like a gong. Four miles to go.

The blond's lily-scented perfume cloyed the air. Sudden quiet. The air conditioner had stopped wheezing. My heart rate spiked.

Ding. Number 4 glowed red above the brass.

The box heating up, sweat oozed in my armpits. I shrugged off my jacket. She reached into her bag. A reflection streaked across the polished brass doors. A knife? I stopped breathing. She shook out a handkerchief, an emerald-cut diamond winking on her finger. Innocuous. The blond seemed to intend no harm, but my prickling antennae said otherwise.

Crawling to the fifth floor was uneventful, but passing the sixth floor, the elevator slowed and began vibrating. As the car jolted to a stop, I begged the doors to open. Dead silence followed.

"I think we're stuck," the blond said.

The lights went out. Pitch dark. I throttled the scream rising in my throat.

Inside a black box, my heart pounding. Gypsy music pulsates, clicking castanets. Cymbals crash. Footsteps circling. A menacing voice whispers, "Katie, Katie, you can't hide from me." The scrape of metal, the hasp latches. I'm locked in! I beat on the lid. All sides closing in . . .

"Are you all right? You're gasping."

Her voice brought me back to the present, my throat too constricted to speak. The dark felt alive, strangling. I started the drill to abort my panic. Slow breathing. Imagine the wide-open sea.

"Are you hyperventilating?" she asked. "I have a paper bag in my purse." Sounds of crinkling paper. "You might want to breathe into it, get a little carbon dioxide."

"I'm fine now." The cloak of darkness was not enough. I wanted to sink through the floor.

"Would you like some water? I have a bottle in my purse."

"Yes, thanks," I croaked, my throat parched. "Do you have dinner in your bag as well?"

Her low chuckle, then the bottle arrived in my hand. I gulped the warm water.

"Are you claustrophobic?" she asked.

"So it would seem."

"I hyperventilate from anxiety, too," she said, as if we were in an old Woody Allen movie.

This was getting weird. I groped along the wall, searching for the control panel.

"I already pressed all the buttons," she said, sensing my purpose. "Nothing lights up. I don't think there's an emergency line, and my cell died on the way here."

I felt inside my jacket pockets—keys, wallet, but no cell phone. I'd left it in the car. A sound like rats scuttling. What was she doing? I peered into the dark, the blackness more impenetrable than my closed eyelids at night. Jingling noises. She was digging through her magic bag.

I leaned back in my corner, the flashback cycling in my mind—the footsteps, the sinister voice, an orchestra playing. Since my father's death, I'd been claustrophobic and had nightmares of suffocating, symptoms that no type of therapy had been able to cure. Severe childhood asthma was considered the cause, but this wasn't a flashback to an asthma attack. Someone had locked me in a box. I didn't recognize the voice, but the music was familiar—the rhythmic beat, the castanets. I hated that foot-tapping music. Dizziness hit, and I grabbed the railing.

"Would you like a mint?" Her sticky fingers touched mine on the railing.

I dropped my hand. "No, thank you." My tone sounded sharp.

Her sandals clicked on the tile as she drew back. I regretted my rebuff. She couldn't know her offerings just aggravated my shame. I felt so vulnerable in this situation; I was bristling like a porcupine. Trained as a singer for the first nine years of my life, I still had my musician's ear, and the cadence of her voice struck a chord deep in my aural memory.

I heard her sniffing. "It's so stuffy in here. I can hardly breathe."

Her plaintive tone awakened my take-charge self. "This is an old elevator. We might be able to open the inner doors and determine where we are."

We felt our way to the brass panels, hooked fingertips into the crack, and pulled. It took five tries to open them. The minor success empowered me. The dark seemed less dense, and light was leaking in. I ran my hands up the rough concrete wall and hit smooth metal at chin level.

"I feel the bottom of the seventh-floor doors," I said. "Let's try to open them."

We pulled, grunting with the awkward effort. The doors wouldn't budge.

"My nails are broken, and my fingers hurt," she whined.

What a wuss she was. "Let's try one more—"

"I suggest we bang on the doors and yell for help," she said.

"Act like helpless women, you mean?"

"Exactly."

I faced the door and squeaked, "Help." She burst out laughing. Then the motor sputtered, and the lights came on. The car lurched up a few feet and bumped to a stop. The doors opened.

"You see, it worked," she crowed, as we rushed into the refrigerated foyer.

We stood blinking at each other under the harsh glare of the ceiling fluorescents.

"I'm Kate O'Dade." I offered my hand.

"Yes, I know." Smug smile. "I'm Elise Devereaux, your four-thirty appointment."

I stared at her, speechless. This possibility hadn't occurred to me. Clients never came to my office a half-hour early. Fashion Plate knew who I was all along and had never let on. A remarkable performance. Chilling. She grasped my hand, and a familiar dread rooted me—the sensation of walls closing in. Then the elevator doors clanged shut.

CHAPTER 2

Elise Devereaux stood in my office and scanned the room with a critical eye. Perhaps she would leave if she didn't approve of the earth tone color scheme or my worn leather furniture. I could hope.

"This space is like an aerie. There's so much light," she said. "It's the ideal spot for you."

Her sly reference to my phobia slid under my skin like a splinter. This was not going to work. I closed the door and gestured toward the client's chair to the right of the window wall.

She minced across the area rug, her gaze riveted on my print of Matisse's *The Conversation* above the chair. "Such a brutal painting. The bright, cozy scene, the couple sitting in silence, glaring at each other. Is this meant to inspire good communication?" Snide smile.

"Let's see if it does," I said, resisting a testy comeback. "Please sit down."

Elise set her tapestry bag on the floor and perched on her chair like the mistress of the manor. I sat across from her, poised to end this doomed consultation.

"We've had a very unusual beginning. I think you'd be better off seeing someone else."

"I don't want anyone else," she said. "You know anxiety personally, that's a plus, and you have a sense of humor. I like . . ." Her voice cracked. "Do you have a problem seeing me?"

"I have reservations. Why didn't you tell me who you were in the elevator?"

Her doe-eyes widened. "I thought knowing would make you more uncomfortable."

Possibly, I allowed. "How did you know who I was?"

"From the picture on the back of your book, *Creative Blocks and Trauma*. I found it *so* enlightening, and I need someone like you who understands creative people."

A sucker for praise, I found myself warming to her a bit and decided to proceed with a consultation. I began with the facts, jotting notes.

Elise reported moving here from Los Angeles a few months earlier. She lived with her husband in Del Mar, north of La Jolla. With her smooth, flawless skin, she looked much younger than her thirty-six years, and her dark brown eyes and brows suggested she was not a natural blond. Maybe she'd once been a mousey brunette. Deception was also her trade. She worked as a *trompe-l'oeil* painter of murals.

"I fool the eye." She flashed snow-capped teeth. "I give the blank wall of a dreary room windows with a magnificent view. My clients get exactly what they want to see."

Expert fakery, I thought. "An important service. Do you like your work?"

"I like that I'm good at it, but I want to be a real artist. *Trompe-l'oeil* work is a craft, highly skilled trickery, as my husband likes to point out." A scowl pinched the prettiness out of her face. "He's an art dealer. He took over the Stanton-Leigh Gallery in La Jolla. Gerard Devereaux. Do you know him?"

"No, I've never met him."

"That's a relief."

"Are there problems in your marriage?"

"Yes, but that's not why I'm here." She grabbed two tissues from the Kleenex box on the side table and scrunched them into a wad. "It's Tommy . . . my son. He's left us to join a religious cult." Her hand flew to her chest, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "I'm so afraid . . ."

I leaned forward. "Afraid he won't come back?"

She nodded and slumped back in the chair, taking slow, deep breaths.

I glanced at her purse. “Do you need the paper bag?”

“No, this is nothing.” When her breathing returned to normal, she leaned over and dug a photograph out of her purse. A gold pendant swung away from her silk blouse. Quickly stuffing it back inside her shirt, she said, “Tommy is eighteen and an Iraq veteran. This is a good likeness of him, before Iraq. It’s from the Christmas before last.” She gave me the picture.

In the photo, Elise and Tommy stood smiling with their arms around each other, their blond heads almost touching. Tommy had dreamy blue eyes and a soft jawline that gave his appealing face an unfinished quality. Two beautiful huskies—Hansel and Gretel, she called them—sat together in front of mother and son with big red bows wrapped around their necks. Tall, silver-blond haired, and handsome, Gerard stood apart, unsmiling, the only one not in a pair. He appeared older than Elise, but his ramrod posture and trim body made his age hard to tell. I remarked on her attractive family.

“We don’t look like the Norman Rockwell family now. The day after Tommy left two months ago, we got this email.” She reached into her purse and handed me the printout.

Mom & Dad, I’ve quit the University. I hate UCSD. The faculty and students have their heads up their butts and hardly notice we’re still at war. School is a waste of my time. I want to make the world a better place. I’m going on an extended retreat with The Fellowship for study and training. I’ve covered the expenses. Don’t try to find me. I want to be on my own. Tom

“Do you think The Fellowship sounds like a cult?” Elise asked.

Tommy’s words—I want to make the world a better place—made me think of a paramilitary or political group. The group’s name sounded church-related but was too general to designate a specific organization. Perhaps Tommy used it to mislead.

“Not really,” I replied. “He makes no mention of a cult leader, faith, or God.”

“Well, that’s some comfort.” She looked down at her fingers shredding the Kleenex and quickly shoved the mess inside her purse. “We’ve looked everywhere for him. The Sheriff’s Department won’t help. They say Tommy’s an adult, and there’s no evidence of a crime. We hired Francisco Flynn, a first-rate private detective, but he hasn’t been able to trace Tommy so far.”

“Tommy probably took care to avoid being found,” I said.

“That’s what the detective thinks. Tommy’s very intelligent. He was an A student before he dropped out of college the first time and enlisted in the Marines. That was a shock. He did it to please his father, but Gerard can’t be pleased.” She tugged at her diamond ring, as though wanting it off. “Tommy was sent home from active duty six months ago. He went blind.” She began shivering.

“Blind?” I offered her the crocheted shawl lying on the couch under the windows.

She wrapped the shawl around her shoulders. “Tommy didn’t lose his sight from an injury. At the VA Hospital, he was diagnosed with PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder—with the conversion reaction of blindness. We didn’t like the treatment at the VA, so we took him to Max Hartman, an expert in treating trauma in veterans.” I nodded, approving. Max was my mentor and godfather. “He’s the one who referred me to you,” she added.

She described Tommy’s dramatic improvement—the return of his sight, going back to school, his major in filmmaking. “Can you believe he threw it all away again?” Her dark eyes blazed, and she erupted, “Gerard’s the one. The sadistic shit drove him away.”

Her sudden raw anger startled me. No longer the refined lady, she clamped her hands to her head, grabbed fistfuls of blond hair, and yanked. “I’ve failed as a mother,” she shrieked, pulling her hair with such ferocity I winced.

“Elise, Tommy has PTSD. You are not to blame for his actions.”

“How can you *possibly* know that?”

“It’s a guess. How do you think you’ve failed?”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she folded her arms and began rocking like a wounded child. I shifted in my chair, my neck stiff with tension. Finally, she opened her eyes and stopped rocking, the storm passing as suddenly as it had struck. I watched her slip out of her sandals, tuck her legs up under her, and rearrange the shawl to conceal her entire body. She was making herself at home. Nesting. My skin rose up in goosebumps.

The clock said fifteen minutes to go. Way too long. I wanted her gone now. I’d grown up with volatile artists, had specialized in treating them, and was usually a fountain of empathy. But for some reason, Elise’s theatrics repulsed me.

“Do you have any sons?” she asked, as though the mad scene had never happened.

I didn’t want her taking one more step into my life, but I gave a slight nod.

“How would you feel if a son of yours went to war, came home, then joined a cult?”

“Every way you’re feeling, but I’d also be angry that he’d put me through such hell.”

“Anger is not an option for me,” she said.

A *self-delusion*, I thought. Anger was evident in the attack on her husband, in her theatrical self-blame, and in the shredded wad of Kleenex hidden inside her purse.

“Why is anger not an option?”

“It’s just not.” She picked at the shawl. “I can’t believe Tommy would leave me twisting in the wind like this. He was always such a thoughtful boy.”

Not anymore, I thought. Her sensitive, good boy was long gone. At least I could feel for her loss as a mother. The room was over-heated now,

the air stuffy like the elevator. Elise sat bundled up in the shawl, staring down at her fingers kneading and plucking the yarn.

“How are you hoping therapy can help?” I asked.

“I want nothing deep. Just to hang on. I have no one to talk to.”

“Tell me something about your background.”

“My past is irrelevant,” she snapped. “I’m not here to discuss my childhood.”

She cut me off at every turn. When she admitted to suicidal thoughts, I felt concerned enough to recommend a psychiatric evaluation. She balked again. I knew taking this case would be a big mistake. Elise seemed poorly motivated for the collaborative work of therapy and had so many difficult traits. She was deceptive, obstinate, and controlling—a manipulative drama queen with erratic mood swings. She’d just been talking about offing herself, and now she was calmly filing her nails. My snap diagnosis was histrionic borderline personality, a.k.a. the client from hell.

Who could I send her to? No one I liked, in good conscience.

Then I saw her standing in the elevator, Fashion Plate, the glamorous thorn, making my phobia bearable. Our time trapped in that cell had forged a curious bond, a mini version of soldiers in the trenches. Something less tangible also drew me—the sense of a deeper connection. Perhaps she reminded me of my fragile mother, who had died four months ago. I couldn’t save my mother, but I had the skills to help Elise. Maybe. I scratched my brain for a solution.

“Since your marriage is troubled, I suggest we include—”

“No!” She clutched her breast. “I *absolutely* don’t want Gerard involved. He can’t know I’m coming here.” Her wild stare topped off the melodrama.

“I thought including your husband would help with how alone you must feel.”

In a blink, tears filled her big brown eyes, and she gazed at me with an unsettling mix of challenge and yearning. “I don’t feel so alone . . . now that I’ve found you.”