

Prologue

Amy was jerked awake as the bus stopped suddenly, then turned a corner. The handcuffs she'd worn all morning were beginning to chaff her wrists and she rubbed at them where the skin was beginning to hurt. She shifted her legs to relieve a cramp and the chains by her feet clanked softly against the floor of the bus.

Looking out the window she saw a completely different landscape than what she had previously viewed while living the last few years in central Texas. Austin was in what was called the Texas hill country, which consisted of rolling hills and short oak and cedar trees. Austin even had a river running right through the middle of town. When Amy first moved to Texas she had been surprised by the fact that green grass and trees grew in Austin. She had envisioned a dry landscape of cactus, dirt and tumbleweeds. Actually Texas had a wide variety of scenery, from the rocky cliffs in west Texas, to the dry cactus and scrub brush of its plains to the green hills of central Texas. Along the coast she had seen seashores and Galveston Island, but this was the first time she had been to east Texas. The bus was now driving past towering pine trees and small ranches with peach orchards covering the hillsides.

When Amy moved her feet the chains around her ankles rattled again. She hung her head in shame, grateful that neither of her parents was still alive to find out what a horrible mess she had made of her life. She shuddered and tried valiantly to hold back tears as the bus slowed and pulled through the first huge gates surrounding a Texas Women's Correctional Facility.

The chain link fences around the complex appeared to be at least twenty feet high and were topped with loops of razor sharp barbed wire. She held her breath as the bus came to a stop. Looking out the window she saw three guards standing at attention waiting for the occupants of the bus to disembark. The officer driving the bus turned around and grinned at the women seated inside.

"OK, ladies, welcome to your new home," he said with an evil chuckle as he opened wide the bus door.

The big burly guard who had been riding in the back of the bus walked to the front and turned around to face the women. He folded his muscular arms across his chest.

"All right, ladies, this is how it works. You are each going to exit the bus quietly, no talking at all and stand in line in front of that door," he said pointing out the bus door to a big metal door on the side of the building outside. The square block building was gray brick with no decoration and no windows on this side. It was dark and foreboding looking, and it would be Amy's home for the next two years.

The seven women on the bus stood up quietly and moved to the aisle. Amy was in a front seat and she became the first in line. She slowly moved forward past the guard and down the bus steps. Her short ankle chains made it hard to navigate stairs or to take big steps.

One of the guards waiting outside had moved forward and now stood beside the bus doors. He was tall and threatening with big hands and muscled arms. He reached over and yanked on Amy's handcuffs, checking to make sure they were still locked. He released her arm and nodded for her to move forward toward the building. He repeated this action with each woman as she came off the bus, checking to make sure the cuffs had not been loosened during their long bus ride from the different local city jails.

Amy walked past the second guard and stood silently in front of the metal door as the other women following lined up behind her. She had not spoken to any of these women on the five-hour bus ride to the prison and she had no idea what crimes they had committed.

This third guard was a female. She pressed a code into a wall panel beside the door and there was a loud buzz as the metal door opened wide. Amy walked through it into a small alcove. Two of its walls were solid metal and the third one facing her consisted of metal bars and a barred door. A buzzer sounded again and the barred door opened.

The guard on the other side of this door motioned for her to come forward and Amy walked through the door. This new guard was huge, even bigger than the others. He was over six feet tall with broad shoulders. He had a full thick beard that hung down past his collar. Amy wondered at that. All the other guards were clean-shaven and he looked a little out of place. His nametag read 'Erickson'. He had blue eyes and blond hair and he appeared bored with the whole procedure as he removed her cuffs and chains and tossed them into a metal footlocker.

"Go on down to the end of the hall," he said. "Stop at that window and the woman there will give you clean clothes." He removed chains and repeated the same message to each woman as she filed past him.

Amy continued down the hallway. At the window a stern faced black woman looked down at her and barked, "Name?"

"Amy Graham," said Amy softly.

"Speak up!"

Amy cleared her throat. "Amy Graham," she said again louder.

The woman looked at her clipboard and checked off Amy's name. "Size eight, bra 34 B?" asked the woman.

Amy cleared her throat but then she just nodded.

The woman picked up a stack of folded white clothing and handed it out the window to Amy. "Next," she called past Amy's shoulder to the woman standing behind her.

A female guard with her blond hair in a ponytail motioned for Amy to go on through a solid metal door at the end of the hallway. Amy walked through it into a small

room that was lined with metal cabinets on one wall and an exam table off to the side. The room was painted a drab gray just like all the other walls she had seen so far. Amy wondered if her whole world would be gray for the next two years.

A woman whose nametag read 'Owens RN' entered from a side door and looked at Amy. The nurse had on navy blue scrubs and shoes, which seemed logical if the inmates were all going to be wearing white. The nurse was young, probably not much older than Amy's twenty-two years. She had long strawberry blond hair and deep blue eyes.

"Undress and put your clothes in that box," she said, not unkindly, pointing to a tall cardboard box in one corner. "I'll have to check to see if you have any lice. Sorry, but it's standard procedure."

Embarrassed, Amy put her new bundle of clothes on the counter and removed her orange jumpsuit and underwear then dropped them into the box. Standing naked made her feel so vulnerable she almost cried.

"Please get up onto the table," said the nurse as she donned a pair of rubber gloves.

Amy climbed onto the exam table and sat with her feet hanging over the side.

Using a fine-toothed comb Nurse Owens looked through Amy's blond hair for any sign of the offending bugs. "Lie down on the table now."

Amy lay down on the table and felt a tear slip past her eyelid as she submitted to the humiliating process of having her pubic hair searched for lice.

"Ok. That's fine," said the nurse as she removed her gloves and opened a small door at the end of the room. "You can get up now. Take your new clothes and go into the shower room. You have to shampoo with this," she said handing Amy a small bottle. "And scrub yourself all over with this." She handed Amy a small bar of brown soap. "Don't rinse your hair for five minutes in case there are any nits I might have missed."

Amy accepted the items and picked up her new clothes. "I don't suppose you have any crème rinse," said Amy shyly. "I have really dry hair..."

Nurse Owens looked at her sympathetically. "Sorry, that's not a standard item. You'll have to buy your own rinse at the prison store."

"Oh," said Amy wondering as she walked into the shower room how in the world she would be able to do that without any money.

The long narrow room had four showers heads mounted along one gray tiled wall. No walls or curtains separated them from each other. There would be absolutely no privacy in this place. Amy put her clothes on a bench that ran along the opposite wall and took her soaps to the shower. She ran the water until it got warm then stepped into the spray. After shampooing her hair she scrubbed herself with the bar of soap and waited

what she hoped was five minutes before she rinsed the foul-smelling shampoo from her hair. While she was showering two other women came into the room and started bathing.

The room filled rapidly but no one spoke. It was almost as if they all believed that if they didn't talk to each other they might wake from some horribly bad dream.

Amy avoided looking at anyone as she walked over to the counter at the end of the room and picked up one of the many white towels from the stack. She wrapped it around herself and used a second towel to dry her hair. She dressed as quickly as possible in the white underwear, bra, shirt and pants that she had been given. They felt stiff and uncomfortable.

Better get used to it, she told herself. You're going to be wearing this stuff for the next two years. A tear slipped down her cheek. She hastily brushed it away with the back of her hand hoping no one had noticed.

A female guard stood at the end of the room just outside the open door. "Go stand in the hallway and wait for the others," she said. "I'll take you all over to your assigned dorms when they've finished dressing."

Amy stood in the drab gray hallway waiting for the other inmates. She shivered as a wave of fear swept over her. She felt more alone than she had ever felt in her life. More alone than when her parents had died.

Why in the world had she ever thought she could get away with writing all those hot checks? She had been incredibly stupid and now look where it had landed her.