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## *Ceremonial Tarp & Dangle*

I 'm hanging upside down, wrapped in tarp, like some retarded Houdini.

How did this happen? Well, it all started with me, on the way to my car after a close call. Back to minding my own business. I always mind my own business because I know there are plenty of other people out there who will mind it for me, if I let them, and I don't feel they're more qualified to fuck up my life than I am.

Only that morning, I was meeting with a client. Which was, in a way, minding someone else's business. But that's the business I'm in. So I can mind someone else's business and be minding my own business.

Glad I got that cleared up.

Lila Dixon was what one might call a tall drink of water. I never knew what that meant until I met her. She towered over me, and if I weren't female, I'd say she threatened my manhood. Lila was also regal, and a perfectly lovely woman, but with some unpleasant truths rooted in denial. For instance, she thought it

was okay to drink a couple bottles of wine and then drive. Maybe because she was so tall. But I wasn't on her payroll to play DUI hall monitor. I was there to help her get something useful on her husband, so that she could finally get away from him, legally.

The briefing complete, she signed the tab and left me to finish my short drink of water, going out the rear door to her car, which she had clandestinely parked a block away, just to assuage her paranoia that the dreaded churlish hubby might follow her. I pulled my eCig out of my coat pocket and refilled the mouthpiece with chocolate mint eJuice. I had discovered the wonderful world of electronic cigarettes a few years ago, while searching for a way to quit. Now, I continued to enjoy them, since all the negatives about tobacco cigarettes didn't exist with the electronic ones. It was just vapor, with the flavoring of your choice. Mine, being chocolate mint.

Lila Dixon's plan to avoid discovery by her husband had apparently failed, I realized, her paranoia justified, as I saw him come in the front door, hairy knuckles dragging the floor, and recognized him from the photos. It was indeed the churlish one: Lila Dixon's husband. The way he was looking at me during his approach made me realize he was on to me. He must have waited for her to leave, so he could rough me up, before going home to do the same to her. I pictured him chasing her with one of those cartoony Flintstones clubs. No time now to worry about her future roughing, I had my own to worry about.

I got up and headed for the door, but couldn't get there through the salad bar, so detoured. The ladies room was just around the corner and I palmed

the door open and went inside. He wouldn't dare follow me in here, in a public restaurant, I told myself. I'm always telling myself these things so I won't come unglued in a crisis.

I noticed that this restroom smelled purple, like some do. Not sure what the smell of purple is, but I always thought that particular scent just smelled like purple. I stepped into the first stall, and slammed the crooked metal door closed behind me, forcing it into the position to accept the sliding latch, ramming the latch closed just as the restroom entry door burst open and slammed into the wall.

Coarse, meaty hands darted under the door of my stall, and I leapt onto the toilet seat, one foot slipping into the bowl. I pulled my sodden shoe out of the water, and regained my breath, searching frantically for a way out. He shook the door violently, cursing me, and my eyes ascended to the small window above the sink on the other side of the stall. When I looked down again, he was crawling under, shoving his huge shoulders between the door and the ugly yellow linoleum, still reaching for me, straining, pushing at the bottom of the door. The latch wouldn't stand for that very long, I knew. Why didn't he just kick the door in? I wondered inanely. Maybe he thought it would make too much noise. The window I spied was small, yet still an escape hatch. The only one to be found. My escape hatches had always been small, but I'd always been able to find them. I'd be damned if I'd break that tradition now.

I climbed the metal wall, boosting myself with the chrome plumbing that rose above the toilet, flushing it accidentally. I've escaped down the toilet!

my mind screamed absurdly at him, feeling a little crazy with fear. My first question was answered when he wobbled out from under the door and began to fling himself against it. I guess he didn't care about the noise after all.

Once at the top, I tried to scale the wall without alerting him to my whereabouts, climbed onto the sink at the other side of the second stall, and pulled the window lever down, pushing the single pane open. Thankfully, there was no screen. Or lock. I took hold of the metal sill, hoisting myself up, my sneakered feet scraping the cinderblock wall, as I alternately pushed myself upward and glanced back at him. He had still not figured out that I was out of the stall, but the door was caving in nicely.

I managed to get my hips onto the sill and flail for a handhold on the dirt and leaves outside the ground-level window. I heard the door crash in, and craned my neck to see him struggling to his feet and watching me, his face red, his brows pulled together like the laces of my shoes.

In what seemed a nanosecond later, I felt his big hand close around my left ankle. Instinctively, I kicked at him, feeling myself being dragged back in. The sill scraped painfully across my hip bones and onto my stomach, stopping just under my breasts, and I was suddenly glad I was not flat-chested. I swung my right leg, sodden sneaker and all, as hard as I could toward his head, making contact, but to no avail. I was reminded of my encounter with the Pit Bull in the Stacey Cartwright case, and wasn't sure if this situation was any less frightening than having a mean dog dangling from my arm as I tried to climb a chain-link fence.

Outside, my hand fell on a broken red brick left over from the construction of the building, no doubt hidden for years behind the shrubbery lining the ground-level windows. When he jerked at me again, I twisted like a cat, felt myself falling. My feet hit the edge of the sink, and I landed with my behind in the bowl, the faucet grinding into my back.

I winced at the pain the awkward landing caused, and when he stepped closer, I lifted the brick, surprised I still clutched it, and brained him. He staggered back, holding the side of his head and I jumped down from the sink, and whacked him again before he could recover. He fell against the wall of the injured stall, and it creaked with his weight. I hurried over to get one more lick in, and when he slumped, I started to climb the sink again, but then stopped, rolling my eyes at myself. I backtracked and went out the door, pausing only long enough to throw the brick at him. It landed on his chest.

The parking lot was just around the building, and in it, my Escalade. The trip to freedom was interrupted by a powerful odor and the sensation of someone's arms around me. It wasn't a hug.