

# Maybe Blue

by Jenny Maloney

**Pink and Keys brought her** to Below. I heard Keys long before I saw the three of them enter. He jingled when his left foot came down and jangled when he stepped with his right. The key chain holding all one hundred and seventeen keys to Below was always clipped to his belt. The trio turned into my hallway and I saw Mathilda for the first time.

White and black. Mathilda had no other shades, not really. Her short hair stayed slicked back from the chalky white of her face. She

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wore a long black dress that draped to her ankles. A widow's peak, as dark as any great depth of the ocean, pointed at the center of her forehead. Half of her face smiled, the black lipstick bringing the corner of her lips upward. A tiny black dot, a dimple, graced the smiling half. The other half frowned, perpetually sad. A black tear fell from the inside of her eye, trailing along the side of her nose, ending right before the black frown of her lip. The rest of her face was powder-white, cold like snow.

I never really knew any true expression from her—except maybe in her eyes. The dimming yellow of the ceiling lightbulbs made her pale skin appear jaundiced. Even Pink's ruddy cheeks looked orange.

I pulled up the preliminary paperwork, barely giving the guards and their prisoner another glance. It also took me a moment to find a pen that still worked. Keys had forgotten to get pens on his last trip Above. When I had my things prepared and the jingle-jangle stopped in front of my desk, I looked up.

"Hello, Quilt." Keys had a deep voice, much deeper than it should have been because he was rather small. One hundred and seventeen

keys should have overwhelmed and bent his small frame, but, somehow, he only jangled.

“Who do you have today, Keys?”

“Young woman, Mathilda.”

“Surname?”

Pink snorted and I looked over at him.

“Don’t even know if Mathilda’s her first name,” he said by way of explanation.

I looked from Keys to Pink and back again. “She doesn’t have a name?”

Pink gave another small, snorting laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just look at her.”

I did, briefly. I didn’t want to know her. To get to know them was dangerous. Looking begat curiosity, curiosity begat questions, questions begat answers, answers begat knowing. I did not want to know them. I wanted to do my job.

“And?” I asked Pink.

“She’s a mime, Quilt. Mimes don’t talk.” Pink said this very slowly, like I was a dull-wit.

I chose to ignore his tone and focus on the matter at hand. “Location of capture?”

“London,” Keys answered. Pink fell back, allowing Keys to take the reins—what Keys liked best.

“Crime?”

“Insubordination.” Here Keys began the formal tone of accusation. “She refused to speak when asked a direct question.”

The question-and-answer session lasted three more minutes and Mathilda, as she came to be known, was locked into her cell.

**Three weeks later I lay on a bench** in the commons, looking up through the dome, and tried to remember what stars looked like. In Below, there are no stars, no sunrises, not even a blue sky. Sunlight cannot penetrate to the bottom of the ocean, even the fish have lost

the need for eyes. The dark is only chased away by light bulbs that are going out, one by one. Keys, on his last trip up, was supposed to get more. Perhaps he forgot.

The commons is rather bare: only two benches and stretches of yellowed tile. Originally the commons area was meant to be a place for the men to gather and converse. Now no one comes except me, when I try to remember stars.

After an hour of blank staring, I got up. Time to get back to post. Today's rotation made me hall monitor of the women's section, or the W-compound. It housed sixteen prisoners, brought in on various charges. Some were insubordinate, like Mathilda. Others were charged with whoring—the other guards made those pay dearly. Two had been brought in for assault. Most charges were fairly mild. Any prisoners brought in for capital crimes did not remain Below for long. The ones sentenced to death, if they lived through the experiment phase, were jettisoned into the darkness above Below, ton upon ton of water crushing down.

Mathilda's cell was the first one on the compound, with three solid walls and one barred door. She sat on the floor, her black skirt puddled around her. She was a mermaid emerging from a hole in the floor. For a brief moment I considered smiling at her but then she looked into my eyes and I stopped. My gaze caught on the black tear falling to her mouth. At first I thought it was real; after all it was as black as real water. The spell broke and I took a step away.

Then her hand moved. I stopped.

She brought her hand to her face, touching her forehead, her cheeks, her chin, her lips and finally her nose. She raised her eyebrows. A question.

I understood.

She wanted to know about my face.

**I remember nothing** about my life before coming Below, except one thing.

Knives are sharp, meant to cut through leather and wood and flesh. My father had such a knife and he would whittle wood for me... small toys. At least I think so. I prefer to think that but it's one of those

things I almost know. The image of my whittling father and the toys he made me are dream-like. I remember, but I don't know if the memory is real. But, like I said, knives are not only meant for wood.

Skin peels beneath a finely honed blade. Blood spills from thin wounds. That's how my father cut me. With a finely honed blade, he peeled and hacked at my face. One hundred and seventeen stitches later I was brought to Below, for my protection and to recover. The memories were erased, the injections were administered. I can't even remember my real first name. For thirty years I have been known only as Quilt.

**When I told her**, she just sat there, in her black puddle. I didn't cry. I've seen enough water in my life to allow any more to come into the world. Afterward, when I was quiet, I felt better.

In the three days following my revelation I visited her five times; an unheard of number of times for a guard to visit a prisoner. If she received a meal, I delivered it. If she needed her laundry changed, I did it. No one else noticed or cared. As long as I was at my post on time, no one paid attention. Perhaps, if they did notice, they thought I was fucking her. At one point or another, every guard had favored a prisoner. Keys had. Many times.

On the fourth day, I brought her breakfast. A half-bowl of oatmeal wasn't much, but that was the designated portion. I put the bowl through the slot but I put it close to the bars, instead of sliding it all the way to her like I normally did. Every time I'd seen her, she sat on the floor with the black dress pooled on the ground. Some impulse made me want to see her walk, to prove somehow that she could move and that my mind wasn't creating some strange phantom in a cell.

I got my wish.

Mathilda rose gracefully off the hard floor, though her dress still brushed the ground. She glided across the room, tall and strong, but thin and so God-awful pale. She turned her smiling side to me. I wanted to reach out and touch her but I resisted. More than one prisoner had tried to seduce-and-escape only to discover they'd injured a guard — a capital offense — and had nowhere to go. I wanted to believe she was different, but I didn't want to tempt her.

Throughout the whole, brief movement of picking up her bowl and spoon she said nothing. Not even a whisper—save for the soft hush of her skirt brushing the floor. She sat down again, the skirt falling like water around her.

**Below has a tendency** to alter a sense of time so we adhere rigidly to clocks and schedules. I went to post and, for the first time, was ten minutes late. I almost felt disoriented but another emotion held sway. I think I was happy.

Until I saw the look on Keys's face. He was not happy. His frown took over his entire face, not like Mathilda's.

"Where the hell have you been? I was about to send a crew."

"Don't you think that's a little extreme?"

Crews were only sent out for guards in extreme danger, like if a prisoner pulled a knife. In all my years in Below, a crew had only been called three times. Three calls in as many decades.

Keys ignored my question and turned to the day's roster. "Prisoner 114 will join the experiments today. She's been here long enough to start contributing, especially since we lost Prisoner 45 yesterday."

"Mathilda will start today?" I wasn't surprised; it took only a matter of days for prisoners to be introduced to the experimental methods. But I felt a hollow in my stomach just the same. The news that Prisoner 45 died did not distress me—it was a miracle she'd survived these last twelve months—but that Mathilda should join the experimental team did distress me.

I must have looked funny because Keys asked, "What's the matter, Quilt? Taken a fancy to the mime?" He snorted. "She must be good for something, I guess. Maybe we'll make her talk today."

Keys had "taken fancies" with more than sixty prisoners and I had yet to take one. He took great pleasure in his own experiments. At first, they thought they were truly favored, exempt from the trials of the day-to-day routine. I, and all the other guards, knew that they were treated the worst when they wound up on the tables.

He walked away with a small smile. He reminded me of someone when he did that, but I couldn't remember who.

Art by Bailey

As the jingle-jangle faded away, I turned to the paperwork. For seven hours I processed entries and results of experiments and tried not to read them.

**I avoided Mathilda's cell** for as long as possible. The attempt at ignoring her lasted seven days, each blurring the one into the next. I entered data and went to bed in a never-ceasing cycle of numbness. I had told her my story, all about my scars. No one else in Below knew that I remembered my father. I'd kept my secret carefully.

When her first report came up on my desk, I had a surprise. UNSUCCESSFUL.

UNSUCCESSFUL meant that the prisoner had not given information. The scientists didn't care what information they received, since they were just practicing interrogation tactics. The scientists just cared whether they got information. The prisoner could say that Germany lost the Great War, huge explosions had destroyed Japan, even that a Communist nation was a world power. No matter what the prisoner said, the experiment was deemed SUCCESSFUL if the prisoner provided anything.

Not one, single, solitary time had I seen an experiment marked UNSUCCESSFUL.

No. Mathilda's first experiment was UNSUCCESSFUL. She had not lied or spoken truths; she had merely lain inanimate as the shocks were delivered.

I found I was breathing easier. My secret was safe, but there might be a day when she would tell about my memories.

I had to see her.

**When I arrived at her cell** she was sitting on the floor, her knees pulled tight into her chest. The full skirt draped so that she looked like a small pile of black cloth, with a pale, shadowed face atop. She looked serene, but there was a tiredness about her eyes.

The soft hum of the air fans made the only sound. I felt the draft against my bare arms, on the outer layers of my ear. The moving air smelled of metal. So the quiet had a smell and a feel to it and I did not understand it.

"You look well."

She looked up at me, but as she raised her eyes, I lowered mine. The floor was cracked, allowing dried plaster to flake off. I glanced up again and met her gaze. She did not look away.

"You're not going to tell them, are you." It was a revelation, not a question. Looking at her, even as weary as she was, I knew she would go silently.

She shook her head. Happy, sad. Sad, happy.

Then she raised one hand and inserted an imaginary key into an invisible lock and turned it.

I shook my head. "Keys is the only one who can unlock the cells. Even if I did let you out, there's nowhere to go."

Mathilda dropped her hand. There was a long silence. I wanted to tell her more about Below and what happened when I arrived after the incident with my father. I wanted to sing her my favorite song, to tell her my favorite color, to show her the paperwork I did every day. But she remained sitting on the floor, curled into a draped ball.

The silence stretched on for what felt like hours, but the quiet wasn't painful. I sat on one side of the bars and she on the other. Occasionally, she would glance at me and I knew there were things she wanted to tell me. I almost encouraged her. A deep part of me wanted to hear about Above—

But no. The world Above was not a place I wanted to return to. Below, no one cut me. I had a job that was important to the future of the whole world—Above and Below. Yet, for just a moment, I wanted her to tell me what waves looked like.

The jingle-jangle broke our camaraderie. Footstep jingle, footstep jangle. Then Keys himself appeared, turning the corner. When he saw me, he stopped, frowning at first and then grinning.

"Couldn't stay away from a little patch, Quilt? Sorry to ruin it for you, old boy, but this one is my current favorite. Off you go."

Keys approached her cell and I stood while she remained perfectly still on the floor. He put the right key in the lock and turned, shouldering me out of the way. "Get to work. She'll be fine. We're just going to have ourselves a little conversation."

I looked back at her, expecting her to plead with Keys. Instead, Mathilda looked straight at me. She raised her hand to her face.

The she placed on finger over her black lips.

**My mother just watched** when my father split open my face. Then she receded into a part of my brain that I can only access when I am in the dome, laying on the bench. Somehow her memory is tied to the stars I can no longer see when just the empty black looks down on me. Her memory is fuzzy, but I know she was there when my father attacked me.

I can't remember her face, but I remember she was there.

She didn't do a thing when they took me down.

**The alarm went off exactly sixteen minutes** after I'd entered the dome, a whole twenty-one minutes after Keys entered Mathilda's cell. A clanging cumbersome ringing vibrated the whole of Below. I felt the trembling in the ground, the arches of my booted feet hummed.

I waited.

The alarm rings for only a few seconds and then crews are supposed to wait a moment to be told where to go and what to do. The alarm stopped.

In the sudden silence I could feel the hairs of my ears twitching, listening for a dead sound. The quiet reminded me of Mathilda. Three banging rings echoed through the dome. I was in a gigantic skull—the noise resounded off the bones.

The infirmary.

There was only one reason to call a crew to the infirmary. It meant someone, a prisoner, had died outside of Below's control. Dying outside the auspices of Below's experiments was against the rules. Eight prisoners had died in my history at the underwater colony. Keys had killed all of them, I knew that much.

I headed to the infirmary.

When I arrived I didn't see the crowd I'd expected. A flap of a white overcoat whipped around the corner—accompanied by hurried footsteps. The physicians had left. Only Keys and Pink

seemed unaffected. Keys stood, keeping his back against the wall. Pink was pinker than normal. A small, mischievous smile twitched at the corners of his mouth, but he didn't allow himself the satisfaction of a full grin.

I followed the direction of Keys's stare, my footstep giving an echoing thud in the quiet room. I saw what I knew I would see. A gurney, covered in a white sheet.

"What happened?" I asked, so softly.

No one answered but I heard a little jingle-jangle as Keys adjusted his weight.

"What happened?" I asked again, louder. The crack in my voice could have split the dome.

"Why do you care?" Pink asked. "You have a crush on the little freak or something?"

"You bet your ass he did," Keys answered. "The only thing stranger than Quilt the Scarface here was that thing there." He nodded toward the gurney.

I turned toward the sheeted figure. Keys jingled up beside me. His muscles twitched, I could feel the pulse of air around him beating.

"You want to see your girl now?" he whispered in my ear. I almost cringed away from electricity caressing my inner ear. Almost.

Without waiting for an answer, Keys yanked off the sheet. Mathilda's body rocked, her skin made a wet, slapping sound before settling. Her face was the same, eyes closed though. The black tear and the dark dimple sank into her white face. She was still now, with neither smiles nor frowns to arrange her features.

"The make-up is everywhere. It doesn't come off. Like your scars, freak," Keys whispered, very close to my ear.

My gaze trailed down her white neck, finding the graceful curve of her white shoulders. Then I saw her breasts, just as white as her face, with five black, bottomless holes above the crest of her left nipple. I thought of the knife in Keys's boot, and how he jingled, then jangled, always off balance.

"You're not looking at the good part, Quilt."

I felt that same tickle in my ear. I wouldn't give Keys the satisfaction of flinching. However, my eyes drifted away from the holes and the black void that tried to draw me in. Her belly was white, her navel tied in a tight white knot, and then the line of pale skin was broken by a patch of soft black curls. Nestled in the curls, lying flaccid and small, was a penis.

I could not breathe.

Pink laughed finally, breaking the silence.

Keys covered Mathilda again, but I don't think it was for my benefit. One look at Keys's own pale face and I knew what had happened. Somewhere, in the dark of Mathilda's cell, he had reached down into that mass of curls, expecting to find something warm and wet. Instead he found something similar to what he fondled every day.

Mathilda would not have fought him off, keeping her secrets, even as the blade rushed down.

I, too, knew what it was like to stand still.

**After we jettisoned Mathilda's body**, I went to lie in the dome and stare at the black ocean. I tried to remember Mathilda's face. I know she was white. I know she had black hair but, like my mother, I can't fix her features in my mind. They remain fuzzy. All I can tell is that her eyes were the color of the ocean? blue.

Maybe they were blue.

