



**THE
SERUM
GENESIS**

**BOOK 1
A TRILOGY**

KAY BOWSER

**THE
SERUM
GENESIS**

THE SERUM GENESIS

**Book One
The Serum Trilogy**

**KAY
BOWSER**



Krouching Tiger
Publications

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dedicated

*To my darling husband, who God gave me with the love, the skills, and the drive to
make my dream come true.*

CHARACTER PORTRAITS



**DR. MARK
YASSIFF**



**KELLIE
YASSIFF**



**JOHN
MAYNARD**



**JACK
JETT**



**STEPHANIE
NELSON**



**THANE
JETT**



**DRAKE
GARRISON**



**GALE
BAILEY**



**GEORGE
HORNFIELD**

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TITLES BY KAY BOWSER

PROLOGUE

“DADDY!”

An excited cry from the kitchen doorway behind him startled Mark Yassiff. He spun around and beheld a beaming six-year-old girl in her pajamas clutching a small teddy bear close to her heart. With a sigh Mark relaxed.

Mark was a man of average height with brown hair and brown eyes. Sagging shoulders and bunched up eyebrows spoke of the long enduring stress plaguing him of late. Wrinkles marred his forehead, and the lines fanning from his eyes could be mistaken for signs of too many migraines instead of frequent laughter.

Kellie’s looks followed after her father with brown hair and eyes. Her small stature was unscarred as yet by the stress that marked her father’s prematurely wrinkled face. The little girl still stood as tall as she could. With a round soft face that often presented huge, batting eyelashes over equally large, warm brown eyes, the sweet innocence in them often brought her father to his knees - bending to her every wish - when he was home.

“Kellie. Sweetheart, why are you out of bed? It’s the middle of the night.” A closer look revealed two tired brown eyes squinting up at him, the long eyelashes of hers fluttering in the effort to stay open. She must have fought very hard to stay awake until he got home.

“I had to, Daddy! I kept my eyes open the whole time!” She confirmed his thoughts with great enthusiasm. “I just *had* to tell you how much I love my new bear! I love you *too*, Daddy!” Kellie rushed to her father and embraced his legs tightly. Mark smiled down at his little girl and lifted her in his arms.

“Well, I’m very glad you like it, and I love you too!” He kissed her lightly on her forehead. “Did Mommy read the letter to you yet?”

Kellie shook her head, dark curls swirled around her head. “No.”

“Good. She’ll read it to you in the morning when I’m gone.”

The joy in Kellie’s eyes drained away and disappointment replaced it. “Gone? Where, Daddy? Where are you going – again?” Her voice faded to a soft whisper. Mark’s heart hurt. His baby girl – he may never see her again. He wanted his last memory to be of her smiling face, not a frown. So, he tickled her. She giggled, and the grin was back.

“Yes, I’ll be gone tomorrow again, but that’s why I gave you the bear – to remember me while I’m away. I gave Mommy something too. I have to go away for a while for work.” Mark explained with a sigh. Kellie nodded understandingly. Dear, sweet Kellie. He’ll miss her. He’ll miss his wife. What had he done?

Mark took his daughter back up to her room. He tucked her cozily beneath her sheets and comforter. He kissed her on the nose, making her laugh. Mark told Kellie goodnight and that he loved her. He left the door open a crack letting in a sliver of light from the hallway.

Mark trudged back down stairs quietly. He snatched his bag already packed and made sure all the doors were locked and the alarm reset. With his bag clutched in his fist at his side and the house dark and silent, Mark dragged himself away from his sleeping family out to the waiting car parked at the curb. He slid inside, and the car immediately pulled away from the curb. Mark stared at his home until it disappeared. Then, he sent up a prayer.

“Lord, please keep them safe, and help me see my wife and daughter again.”

PART

ONE

> 16 YEARS LATER <

CHAPTER ONE

“HEI, DU!” An angry Norwegian shouted.

John Maynard booked it down the dark musky hallway; his large boots pounding on the rickety floorboards. Maynard is a bulky, strong man about five feet eleven inches tall. His eyes are green like the crayon. They demand his way often with a forceful glare and a glint of promised pain if he doesn't get his way. His hair is dirty blond and is always blown every which way with no kind of purpose. John's looks are his last concern on any day of the week. He only cares when it benefits him in getting what he wants.

John is a man of determination and smarts who loves adventure and tackling challenges. Right now, he is running away from charging angry voices behind him. He threw open several doors in search of the stairs leading to the main floor.

“Akk! Så beklager, folkens! (Oh! So sorry, guys!)” John apologized in Norwegian as he hastily backed out of another occupied room. He paused a moment listening in an attempt to gauge his followers' location. The angry voices were getting closer.

“I *wish* these people would have used a more universal architectural plan for this building. Where are those stairs?!” John muttered moving further down the hallway. A few more doors and at last he found the stairs going down. Somewhere else on the other side of the hallway he would find the stairs going up - neither of the doors were labeled. More angry voices yammered up the stairway at him. Shoving the door closed in frustration, John spit and huffed under his breath.

“Come on!” He exclaimed in exasperated Norwegian. The voices behind him were even closer. He was nearly out of time and boxed in. Racking his brain John remembered the colorful awnings that surrounded the building on the first floor. They were as sturdy and as big as he was going to get on such short notice. Remembering which side of the building he had parked, John barged through the room directly to his right on the left side of the hall. In his momentum he swung the door closed behind him.

The room he entered was a very aged hotel room. Everything was so old. The room appeared to be merely a very faded picture of what it once had been. John was sure he was breathing in a couple of species of mold because the room was so musty. With long strides he strode to the window facing the street, not bothering to notice if there was anyone already in the room. Unable to open the window, he threw the chair through the window with all of his might and ripped off the blanket from the nearest bed. The second he heard it land he heard both angry groups meet in the hallway. Their volume significantly increased.

John wrapped the blanket hastily around him and charged through the window. Soaring through the air John tightened into a ball, and his muscles tensed anticipating the impact.

POOF! The awning wasn't as sturdy as he had thought, but that fact became a blessing. It was sturdy enough to slow his fall, but rickety enough not to break anything on impact. His ribs would still give him grief later, though. Taking a slow, deep breath he eased himself out of the blanket and shook his arms and legs to be rid of any stray shards of glass. He took off at a run to his truck just as he heard Norwegians shouting from the window above.

"What do you mean charging through my room?!"

"Come back!"

"You fiend! Bring it back!"

Safely speeding away in his truck, John chuckled. Grinning John pulled out the gold nugget he had swiped from Skolyst's vault. John had been recently released from prison for another heist. In prison he learned about this particular treasure eavesdropping on some inmates. Listening in on them, he learned from all of their mistakes, thereby walking away with the coveted item.

"Not as tough as I'd thought. Kept me on my toes, but the job sure didn't live up to the stories. Those men didn't have the smarts to learn from the others before they'd tried..." He barked a laugh ending with an arrogant smirk. Glancing at the road, he stuffed the gold nugget in his duffle beside him. After a few miles John slowed down, made a few turns and arrived at the Trondheim Dock.



"'Bout time you laggard! Get aboard before I ship out without you. You were supposed to be here ten minutes ago! What kept ya?" The scruffy Norwegian captain of the *Mektig Bytransport* demanded. John just smirked.

"I could have brought the authorities following behind my dust-trailing tail if you'd've preferred." He answered irksomely. The captain's eyes widened a fraction then glared. He mumbled grumpily as he stalked away barking orders at the crewmen as he went. John laughed to himself as he hefted his gear on his back and boarded the ship. The captain and his crew were not anymore perfect citizens than John was, so John knew he would not receive any more grief for the wait until they were well under way.

One of the crewmen showed him to an open bunk. There he settled in, nodding his thanks to the man as he walked away. Thankfully the men were all working up top, so he had a few solitary minutes to carefully wrap his gold nugget in a cloth and tuck it in a pouch he hung from his neck under his shirt. He'd considered hiding it in a boot, but he had too many things hiding in them for comfort already. John could not wait to take his vacation. He had mapped out an out-of-the-way island that seemed nice.

The fast life was fun, and it had its moments, but every once in a few years a guy has to take some time off before it started to get to him. You know, the feeling that it was time to find a woman? Time to get married and settle down before it was too late, whatever that meant. That feeling had been pestering him more than usual. Maybe because he had not taken a vacation in such a long time... That was the only thing that made any sense to him. So, to try to tamp down that pesky feeling, John was on his way to an island to relax for a few of weeks before he had to get busy again. John Maynard was *not* getting married. He had made that promise to himself at twelve years old, twelve years ago.

John was a Norwegian native having been born and raised in Norway. Six years ago John left home and had begun the fast life and only recently regretted that he wasn't running *for* the law instead of *from* it. Most of the law men he had come into contact with when he had been locked up himself were actually men he could respect – after he had moved past his frustration of being caught. Someday he would find a way to work for the law along with finding the truth about God.

John had been searching for God ever since he had left home those six years ago. His *mor* had spoken of God; his *far* denied Him - two conflicting stories. John was determined to find out who was right.

So, every night John scoured his battered black Bible hoping to find the answers. Through his diligent research, John discovered that He seemed to be a great Guy. God claimed to have created the world; John believed this. God claimed to love His creation; John thought that to be true, too. Why would God create something, putting time and effort and thought into something, and not love it? John remembered spending hours making model boats and ships. He determined not to let his mother throw any of them out, even though he was running out of storage space for any more. He cared about those things. Because of that, he could relate somewhat with God.

Even after these revelations, however, John still felt like he was missing a vital piece of the puzzle. But, what? Not a clue. Besides searching for answers himself, John interrogated every religious man he could find, as much as he could, everywhere he went. A couple of times John thought that he had been close to what he had been searching for, but he had felt something lacking in those answers. What frustrated John the most was how determined he was, yet he kept coming up empty. How do you get the answer you are looking for when you don't know what to ask? John was sure he was close; he was struggling to be patient for this God to give the answer though.

In the meantime, he was looking forward to his upcoming vacation. One stopover before his destination, and he will be living easy for four blessed weeks. White sandy beaches, blue skies, and palm trees – yes, John Maynard was definitely looking forward to this trip!

Having gotten his two bags tucked away in the space beneath his bunk, John stretched out on his small bunk. With a sigh he folded his hands behind his head. He could really use a shower to wash away the dirt and slivers of glass he knew would be setting in right about now from his dive through Skolyst's second story window. Along the same line of thinking, he probably should do some laundry. Not usually his first priority, but if the feeling that he should get married ever stuck, John figured a girl might appreciate it if he wore clean clothes. Despite that, he preferred to wear clean under shorts. So, John did his laundry.

He must have dozed off because he felt himself leaning precariously off the edge of the bunk. With a grunt he rolled onto his back and wiped the sleep from his eyes. Just as he swung his legs to the floor, John clutched the pouch through his shirt. He felt the hard lump of gold as it resisted his death grip. John blew out the breath he had been holding in relief.

"Did you just have a heart attack?" John looked up at the man squinting down at him. He must have been passing through the bunks.

"For a moment I thought I would have one." John laughed. The man chuckled and continued on his way. John sighed and picked up his lazy bones to go find some grub and the wash room. John groaned inwardly while his muscles complained as he stretched. Yes, a shower would be a very good thing.

Later that night John continued his search through his Bible for some answers. When the "lights out" call sounded, he sighed in frustration. Still, no answers. He felt like he was so close, but he couldn't figure out what was keeping it out of reach.

If John knew how to talk to this God, he would just ask Him. John figured that if God could create a whole world, *surely* He could find a way to give him some answers.



Announcements of coming to port in Florø, Norway rippled through the crewmen down to John. Although this was only his stopover, John grabbed his bags to go ashore. He had lost his belongings a few too many times by leaving them on his previous form of transportation unattended as it left without him. He would rather not get stranded with nothing to his name again.

“Hei, du!” A Norwegian grunt summoned. John looked around. The captain was signaling him over.

“Ja, Sir?” John answered back in his native tongue.

“I was just radioed that we’ve got to make a quick stop in the States for a pick up. It’s on the way to your destination. Just thought you’d like to know.” The captain grunted. John nodded his thanks then made his way to shore. Once he found what sounded to be a reputable café of sorts, John claimed a table and groused over the menu about the extra stop between him and his four-week vacation.

“No, you idiot!” An angry man’s holler in English from two tables over arrested John’s attention. Casually looking around and careful not to move his neck much, John located the infuriated man. If looks could kill, then the man across from him would be dead three times over already – if that were possible. The man that hollered realized the scene he must have been making and quieted down some. The man was so angry, he couldn’t seem to keep his tone in check. The man was still hollering but in a hoarse whisper. The other man that was receiving the insults merely looked frustrated. It must not be the first time the other man had blown a fuse at him.

“Hornfield’s going to burn us alive over all this wasted time!” Hot Head continued in English and pounded his fist on the table. “You’re lucky there’s a boat going back to the States where that Yassiff girl *really* is. I still can’t believe you blundered this up so much as to take us to the *wrong country!*” Exasperated Eddie nodded his head in a lulling annoyed fashion. This was definitely not the first time he had endured this rant.

John shifted uneasily in his seat. Furrowing his brow in thought he gulped from his drink. His waiter had brought his order in the middle of Hot Head’s rant. They’re tracking a girl. But who? This Hornfield guy must have hired them. What boat are they hitching a ride on to the States? Wouldn’t be his would it? No, that’d be too easy.

Hot Head finally calmed down enough that John couldn’t make out their agenda. John growled internally. Glaring over at their table, John grumbled about not being able to hear, and being interested at all. He was about to go on vacation. Can’t a guy have a few weeks all to himself without someone getting into trouble? He didn’t typically get mixed up in other people’s business, but this was clearly more than one man after one woman. John wasn’t a fan of those odds. So, of course, he had to find out what was going on and help the girl. The lure of a challenge would always be his undoing.

Keeping an eye on the two men, John finished his meal and mulled over everything he’d heard so far. Not much to go on. He’d just have to follow them until he caught wind of the girl’s name and enough information to grasp the situation to help her. John wondered just how long this would take. He thought about lengthening his vacation time. This girl, whoever she is, had better be grateful for this! It had been a long time since his last time off. He was going to really enjoy this vacation if he ever got there.

Hot Head and Exasperated Eddie got up preparing to leave. John signaled the waiter without drawing attention to himself. Keeping pace at a distance, John was glad to discover that the two men were boarding his boat to the States after all. That's convenient. Noticing they had hired a translator, John seized on the opportunity to "buddy up" to the man. John didn't find out much. Most he had already deduced himself: they were foreigners, looking for a girl, one was not very bright, the other moderately. What little new information he learned didn't help him a whole lot. John learned that they seemed to be the runners for some other main man in the States.

John ambled on down to his previously claimed bunk and stashed his bag. Sighing he chuckled softly to himself. Vacation. One day he will get there. Damsels in distress... What a bother! John grabbed his Bible and began to read. After a moment he stopped. *She's going to be pretty. She has to be if I'm going to all this trouble. It is the least she could do*, he thought. With a nod of satisfaction, John continued his evening Bible study for the truth.

CHAPTER TWO

“HEY!” Kellie said annoyed. This was the third black suit-clad man to roughly push past her. She had had enough. “Hannah, please, can we find our table now?” She asked as she turned to where she thought her friend was. “I’m tired of –” Kellie broke off. Hannah was not there. She was a minute ago. “Hannah? Where are you?” Kellie scanned the faces around her. Hannah was nowhere around. No big deal. She was probably already back at the table just as tired of being pushed around as Kellie was. Kellie politely said ‘Excuse me.’ at least a half dozen times before finally reaching her destination.

Kellie set her clutch down beside her friend’s clutch and sighed in disappointment at not finding her friend at the table like she thought she would. Hannah was not at their table, but her clutch with her phone in it was? Where was she? The restroom maybe? That was odd that she left her phone on the table. Hannah’s phone was usually glued to her hand.

Kellie scanned the room for her friend wondering, not for the first time, why she had let Hannah talk her into coming to this black-tie charity event. It was not really her thing getting all dolled up only to complain about pinched toes and aching feet after standing in stilettos all night – not really Hannah’s either. However, their boss had given Hannah two tickets to the event deciding that he did not wish to attend this year. Therefore, he had decided to send Hannah and a plus one of her choice in his stead. Hannah had insisted that Kellie was the only person that she would even consider taking with her, so here Kellie was. Hannah had said this would be good for them to get out and have some fun together.

Hannah and Kellie had become fast friends in their first year working for Marley and Mason’s, Inc. Both started as interns, but were quickly hired right out of college. Together they had done well and climbed the promotion ladder to be right hands for a floor supervisor in the growing company.

Both girls were pretty, but their looks were night and day in contrast. Kellie had dark looks of brown, naturally luscious curls with matching cocoa eyes. Kellie had a more serious-reserved air to her countenance. Hannah had golden stick-straight blonde hair that fought even the most expensive curling iron and bright blue laughing eyes, but Hannah convinced Kellie to take the time to straighten her hair since she herself took the painstakingly long time to curl her own hair. For the occasion of the charity event, Hannah had decided that the two friends would exchange hairstyles for the night. Both were slim and trim thanks to many trips to the local gym, but Kellie was on the short side where Hannah was tall like a model. Kellie often envied her friend’s looks in secret.

Kellie and Hannah met first in the church that they both attend. Hannah had been an answer to Kellie's prayer having needed a bosom friend for some time. College was a hard time for her to try to connect with anyone. Kellie had regrets that she did not make that time of her life more memorable. Now, she enjoyed her present with Hannah by her side and tried to make many memories with her.

But, as Kellie sat by herself in a sea of people at the charity, she wondered again why she had let herself be talked into this particular adventure. As she sipped her soda and people watched, Kellie caught a glimpse of Hannah across the room talking to someone. People milling about kept her from making out who it was Hannah was talking to. Kellie was sure that Hannah did not look at ease with the situation though. Kellie put down her drink and grabbed her clutch as she got up to make her way over to her friend.

As Kellie got closer she recognized two of the black suit-clad men around Hannah as the same men that knocked into her earlier. Hannah noticed Kellie, and her eyes widened. Kellie almost thought it was directed to the man talking to her. Kellie wasn't sure that whatever they were talking about was good. Hannah looked upset. The men still had not noticed Kellie. Hannah shook her head imperceptibly looking away. To others it looked like she was shaking hair out of her face. For Kellie, Hannah was cueing her to hit the road. They usually used it at work to cover for the other; but, as you can see, the signal can be used anywhere as needed.

Kellie frowned and continued to press forward through the myriad of people. She wasn't going to let her friend go through this one alone. She had an uneasy feeling about this situation. Hannah shifted her weight in agitation at Kellie ignoring her signal. Now, the men noticed Kellie, and their attention honed in on her. It was pretty uncomfortable the way they watched the two women. Kellie had not noticed the third man up until this moment. He was the last man to push her earlier before she had made her way to her table. All three men that had bumped into her were there and accounted for. This just got even more weird.

Hannah full-on glared at Kellie. Kellie only spared her a glance before turning her attention to the man that had been addressing her friend in such an authoritative manner. He definitely was not their boss or even their supervisor. This man was pretty short with a ramrod straight posture trying to compensate for the lack of height. This did nothing to take away from his air of authority and intimidation. He had reddish-brown hair and grey eyes that bore into the unfortunate girls. His mouth sneered at them in a botox frozen smirk. His eyelids were lazy, but his eyes held a disturbing excited, almost arrogant, glint. The three men standing around them, that had bumped into her, were all about the same height – tall – and henchmen looking with stoic expressions permanently plastered on their faces. Kellie had never seen any of these men before tonight.

"Hey, Hannah. I've been looking all over for you! Kellie Yassiff. Who might you be?" Kellie introduced herself. Hannah – well, if looks could kill... The man raised his eyebrows in surprise, a faint smile played at his lips stretching his smirk nastily. Straightening his spine even more he extended his hand for a handshake.

"Ben. Ben Richmen. Pleasure to finally meet you." Kellie shook hands with Ben. Confusion wrinkled her brow for two reasons: Hannah nearly gasped at their handshake, and 'pleasure to finally meet you'? Kellie voiced her confusion in the form of a question.

“Finally meet me? Do I know you, or you – me?” Kellie allowed a half smile to keep her words light despite how much her nerves were telling her something was off. At the same time she was trying to convince herself that the three men standing in the backdrop really were not moving steadily closer. If they were it had nothing to do with the crowd. On her way over Kellie had noticed that the people seemed to be avoiding the group. It was as if they could feel the strangeness of the situation and did not want a part of it.

“I don’t know you personally, no. I do, however, know a man who knows you very well. Though he tried not to reveal too much, he slipped up enough for me to find you.” Kellie gaped. Ben gestured to the men behind her and Hannah. With that two men stepped forward and each grabbed one of the women’s arms while simultaneously sticking something hard into the women’s sides through the pockets of their suit coats. Kellie and Hannah gasped looking fearfully into each other’s eyes. Ben glowered and shushed them, yet smiled at a passerby or two.

“Ladies, the goal is to be as inconspicuous as possible.” Ben smiled and signaled to the men to usher the women out. All the way out of the building and not one person stopped them. They were not concerned whatever about the crowd of six, awkwardly leaving the party, after it had barely begun. Ben led and his three henchmen ushered Kellie and Hannah out to an awaiting black stretch sedan. One of the men proceeded them, and another shoved the ladies in after him before following himself. Ben entered sitting across from the women with the second henchman. The third henchman closed the door behind Ben and hurried to seat himself up front with the driver. Ben tapped the middle barrier to signal the driver that they were ready to depart.

“Get comfortable, ladies.” Ben chuckled. “We have a long drive ahead of us.” The henchmen heeded his words, but Kellie and Hannah were too worked up and frightened to relax. They had just been kidnapped. No one was going to come after them if they didn’t show up to work Monday morning. Hannah’s family was in another state and didn’t have any friends besides Kellie. Kellie had not lived here long enough yet to make a close friend at her new church besides Hannah, so she was sure that she would not be missed Sunday. In the way of family, Kellie only had her mom, but she had moved away from home to pursue her career. So, unless Kellie missed a prearranged phone call with her mother, she wouldn’t be looking for Kellie either. Her father had been gone for the last 16 years without a word save for his last note that her mother had read to little Kellie the next morning. The note held empty reassuring words with a heavy dose of sorrow filling in between the lines. Mr. Yassiff was presumed dead some years later. Who was the man Ben spoke of?

Without any other hope Kellie prayed. Because she could not count on men in this situation, Kellie laid her worries at God’s feet. After a couple of hours Ben and his men had nodded off. Kellie was not about to wait until they got to where they were going to find out what awaited them. She was going to get help. God can help her, and she was going to trust Him. So, she whispered to Hannah her plan.

“I’m going for help at the next stop light. Come with me!” Kellie urged her friend. Hannah’s eyes widened at Kellie. She shook her head vigorously.

“No! Don’t! They have guns! They. Will. Kill. You.” Fear radiated from the blonde.

“So, wait and see if they kill us there? No way!” Kellie glared. Her eyes pleaded with Hannah to see reason.

"Please, don't Kellie! I haven't seen anyone out there. You won't find help..." Hannah looked at her friend pleading through her eyes, "—not before they catch you." Kellie set her lips in a firm line.

"I have to try! Come if you want, but don't stop me!" Kellie whispered harshly in Hannah's ear. She cautiously looked at the men around them making sure that they were still sleeping. Hannah's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Don't stop me." Kellie repeated for good measure. "Besides, I already have help." Hannah looked back questioningly. "God, silly." Hannah rolled her eyes in a 'Right!' motion.

They both glanced at the sleeping men around them before hugging each other as they felt the car slow. Kellie looked at Hannah askance. Hannah pressed her lips together and shook her head decisively. Kellie swallowed her tears and pushed herself out of the car. As soon as she landed on the concrete, she thanked the Lord that the door was unlocked and bolted to the side of the road.

The door must have been pretty quiet because she did not hear anyone coming after her. There were few streetlights along this road, but she could see several cars sat in the parking lot parallel to the road. She did not slow down but booked it to hide behind a car so she could collect her bearings. Just as she ducked behind a car she heard a door slam and curses fly. They were awake and looking for her. Her fear slammed into her like a two ton load of bricks.

"Ohpleaseohpleaseohplease!" She begged the Lord in between pants. Thankfully the car she had chosen to hide behind was not near a street lamp. She had recognized the voice to be Ben's. Listening she heard the man's foot falls sounded a ways off yet. Nearly in tears Kellie begged God to help her get away and find someone to help her and her friend. Frantically she looked around her and the car. Further down the street she noticed the entrance to a subway station. Maybe she could lose Ben on the other side. It was worth the risk. Kellie jumped up and ran with all of her might for the station entrance. The man was closer than she had thought. His foot falls picked up speed. She had been spotted!

Kellie whimpered and ran a little faster with adrenaline kicking in. Panting out of control, she did her best to hustle down the entrance stairs leading to the subway in her high heels. She did her best not to get stuck on the stair rail in a death grip. The man was nearly on top of her! Kellie was gasping for breath as she ran to the revolving bars blocking her way to the boarding station. She sloppily jumped over one and made a mad dash for the exit stairway. Just as she was running up the exit stairs Ben had caught up.

Kellie screamed at the top of her lungs as he grabbed her. Panic nearly took over her mind. She swung around with her fist and connected with Ben's nose. His grip slipped as he held his nose, and a curse flew again. Still panic-stricken out of her mind, Kellie kicked at him, not holding back. She kicked him in his midsection. He cried out as he doubled over nearly falling back down the stairs again. Not waiting for him to recover, Kellie rushed up the rest of the stairs and hurried toward the first building she saw. Another street with still no people anywhere? What time was it anyway? Is tonight universal 'stay home night'? Kellie groaned in frustration. She could hear Ben yelling at her that she was going to pay for beating on him when he caught her, and he *would* catch her.

Kellie nearly cried she was so scared. Her legs were so tired. Her lungs burned. She was really thirsty, too. No help in sight. Her body was about to give in, and Ben was about to catch her. What was she going to do?

Running down another alley, she realized that she was running next to a warehouse. She heard voices coming from inside it. Kellie let out a sob of pure relief. Her eyes scanned the side of the building in search of the entrance.

“Hey! Just give up!” Ben hollered as he panted for breath. He had tossed his head back in exasperation as he stumbled toward her. Kellie gasped and bolted around the building. At last she found the door to the warehouse and burst through the rickety door. Spinning around to lean against it, she looked into the faces of all the voices she had heard from the outside. Her face enflamed in embarrassment and all hope drained away.

She was looking into the faces of about thirty backstreet boys playing basketball. They had all stopped and turned to stare back at her, curious who was barging in on their private game. Just as she was about to exit the warehouse, she heard Ben growling loudly without. Kellie did not think – did not hesitate. She pleaded with these scary men before her.

“Guys, I know you don’t know me, but I need your help! There’s a man after me, and he wants to hurt me! Please...*please*, help me!” Kellie pleaded, tears streaming down her face. She was so desperate that she had knelt to the ground and lifted her clasped hands in added effort. They all stared in amazement. One stepped forward and lifted Kellie to her feet. Her knees shook so much she could barely stand on her own. The basketball player spoke.

“Mickey, your shirt!” Someone who luckily was wearing two shirts shed one and tossed it to the one who spoke. “You, give her your hat. I’m Duncan.” The spokesman introduced himself. “Here, sweetheart, put these on.” Duncan slid the shirt over her head, and Kellie stuck her arms through the sleeves. Duncan tightened the baseball hat on her head. “Let’s play some ball.” He grinned down at her. Kellie tried to smile back at him. All the guys resumed their game again. They strategically kept her surrounded and included in the game.

The warehouse door slammed open, Ben stormed in. He was hot with anger. Duncan and a few others threw out some exclamations and trash talk of indignation at him barging in on their game. Those that stayed silent made some gestures, but nothing too dramatic to draw attention to their shortest player even in heels. A couple of the guys even stepped in front of Kellie, pushing her behind them.

Ben angrily demanded that someone tell him if they knew where Kellie was. He asked if they had seen a girl come through the warehouse. They denied having seen her and told him to hit the road, so they could finish their game. Ben snarled something Kellie could not make out and left.

Kellie let out the breath she had been holding and a small laugh. The guys continued their game until she had calmed down. When she was at last comfortable, they called it a night. As they all began to disperse, Kellie started to get worried again. She had no idea where she was. She was sure she was not anywhere near her home... What was she going to do now? She had promised Hannah to find help, but she did not even know if she would last that long. She did not have anywhere to stay. Duncan sauntered up to her. Kellie looked up at him shyly.

“Thank you so much for helping me, Duncan.” Kellie smiled. Duncan swatted the air and swayed as he looked around with a smile.

“Sure thing, sweetheart. You going home now? You need me to make sure the snarly dude leaves you alone and take you there?” Kellie looked up at him in awe.

“That would be so nice! Thank you!” Kellie exclaimed. “Why are you helping me like this?” She asked cautiously.

“I don’t like bullies. The man strikes me as one.” Duncan shrugged. “Plus you’re pretty. There’s no need for all those wrinkles to start setting in on that forehead of yours.” He chuckled. Kellie laughed.

“Where am I?”

“Don’t you know?” Duncan frowned.

Kellie shook her head. “My friend and I were kidnapped. She wasn’t able to get away. We’d been on the road a couple of hours before I had decided to slip away at a stop light.” Kellie scuffed the sole of her shoe on the ground self-consciously. Duncan whistled.

“Wow. Now I really wished I’d belted that guy one...” His frown had deepened in disgust. “Messin’ with girls... Oughtta be knocked down a few levels.” Duncan snapped out of it. “Alright. What’s your name?” He looked surprised that he had not asked yet.

“Kellie.”

“Kellie. We’re goin’ to my house, and you can stay with my sister, ok? She’s real nice and will love the company. We’ll call the police and figure out where we need to go from there.” Duncan grinned. “How does that sound, sweetheart?” Kellie grinned back.

“Sounds great! Thanks.” Duncan guided her out of the warehouse, down the road, and down a couple more streets before they came to a little white house in a small neighborhood. Kellie was limping heavily by this time in her torturous heels.

“My home.” Duncan said bashfully.

“It looks nice... for being in the dark.” Kellie complimented with a small laugh. Duncan chuckled.



In the morning Kellie moaned and rolled over on a springy mattress. She cracked an eye open and took in her surroundings. The more she didn’t recognize her surroundings the more alert she became. A deep frown creased her brow as she fought hard to remember what had happened last night.

Kellie rubbed at the sleep that remained in her eyes. Sitting up she heard humming. Next she saw that she was not wearing her pajamas. These were about two sizes too big. Slowly rising to her achy feet she noticed a neat pile of folded clothes awaiting her on a chair nearby. Moving to the door quietly she listened for a moment to hear what sounded like humming. Enjoying the sound combined with the heavenly aroma of breakfast in the air, she smiled.

Kellie leisurely dressed and gathered her pajamas together in a neat pile replacing the clothes on the chair that she was now wearing. Quietly Kellie opened the door to the room she was staying in. Slipping out she closed it securely behind her. She stole down the hallway and down the stairs following the heavenly smell and sounds toward what she assumed to be the kitchen. Peeking around the last corner she found a soft, cheery woman carrying on in the kitchen. She sashayed here and there happily doing her thing while unknowingly being watched. The woman had black as

night hair and rosy smiling cheeks. Her humming was sweet and calming. The woman was neither large nor small. She was quick to smile even by herself.

Kellie had not heard Duncan behind her which she later realized was odd considering he wasn't a small man. Duncan wasn't particularly short, but the darkly tanned man held enough muscle and extra weight one would think the man would be a lumbering big-foot.

"You can go in, you know." He shrugged with a half-grin. The corners of his kind, pale-blue eyes crinkled in the corners, and he rubbed his hand over his short cropped hair. The hairs on his head were too short to tell the color that he might as well be bald. "She won't cause you any trouble. I promise." He grinned amused. Kellie blushed. Exhaling a half chuckle, she straightened, preparing to follow him into the wonderful-smelling room and toward the friendly looking woman.

"Ah!" The woman exclaimed. "You're both awake! I wondered when the bacon would lure you down." She grinned smugly. "Bacon is the best wake-up call around, I say."

Duncan interjected, "And she says it every time she makes bacon." He shoved his sister good-naturedly. "Alison, Kellie is in need of a friend and some good food. Then after the essentials she needs to get home. Think you can help her with that while I'm at work?"

Alison stared at her brother with her lips pursed. "Of course, I can." She rolled her eyes. "I like her. She's easy to be friendly with." Alison winked at Kellie.

Kellie blushed.

"We'll figure out where you need to be and get you there in no time." Alison grinned.

Duncan smiled. "Great! See you later, ladies!" He turned a bashful grin Kellie's way and shrugged digging his fist deep in his pockets. "Nice meeting you. Travel safe." With this final farewell he shoved through the front door on his way to work.

"My. I believe my brother has a crush on the pretty lady." Alison chuckled.

Kellie narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't think so. We've only just met, and I'm leaving today..." She laughed.

"That never stopped someone from liking someone else before though, has it?" Alison pointed out. Kellie only laughed unable to refute her friend's point.

CHAPTER THREE

JACK JETT, an average height, light honey-brown haired boy with classic blue eyes, fidgeted in his chair waiting to be called in. Jack was muscled to the gild and so physically fit he sometimes felt that he could take everyone of these jerks always ordering him about. Until that is they wrung him dry after a full day of constant mental and physical training. Jack's eyebrows were permanently scrunched in a scowl these days and his blue eyes blazed in anger at anyone that addressed him. Every morning his muscles would vibrate with the need to take out his fiery emotions on someone just before a guard would put him in his place and begin his day-long training.

Dr. Yassiff was nice enough, but everything else about the situation seemed seedy. Jack was not exactly sure what first gave him the impression. Maybe it was the endless supply of bulked goons, or how he rarely saw another "patient" – more like captive – around. If he did spy someone else dressed in the same sky blue scrubs as he was, it was in mere passing. Not that he would know that the blue on his clothes matched the blue in the sky anymore.

The last glimpse of the sky for Jack was seven years ago in the mall parking lot in his home town. He had been neatly snatched, gagged, and blindfolded. He was thrown into a vehicle and days later thrown into the Richmen's Reformed Program. Where? He was not sure. Reformed how? He was not sure of that either. Up until this point, Jack had been under an intense physical building process: strict diets and extreme workouts and conditioning.

Today it had been announced over the intercoms that Jack had graduated. Five minutes later he had been escorted to see the doc. Jack now waited impatiently for his turn. As he walked into the waiting room, a girl was being ushered into Dr. Yassiff's office.

Just as Jack had lost all patience, he heard the worst blood-curdling scream come from where the girl and doctor had entered. Jack jumped from his seat hands fisted, eyes wild, nose flared, and shoved at the goon on guard in front of the door. Caught off-guard the man whose nametag read, "Redburke," stumbled, but he grabbed Jack's arm as he went to open the door.

Jack, hearing another scream spurred him into action, punched Redburke in the nose causing it to bleed in a rush. The man doubled over from pain and bewilderment since he was not used to patients fighting back. Taking his opportunity Jack burst into the room where the girl was screaming.

The girl lay strapped to an examination table while Dr. Yassiff pulled a fearfully large needle from her arm. Jack sprinted to her side just as she released another scream. Her long auburn hair was splayed all around her head while her face was flushed and scrunched in great pain. Sweat beaded

her forehead. She was lean with a layer a softness that was miraculously maintained. Even through the intense treatment she likely has undergone just like Jack had undergone - the girl managed to hold on to a softness that graced her countenance, not just her physique.

“What did you do to her? What is that stuff?” Jack seethed. Dr. Yassiff looked pained as he moved to attach an IV. Jack swatted at his hand. The doctor jumped as if seeing Jack for the first time.

“I have to give this to her. It will thin the serum to help mix it in with her blood. She’ll feel better. Please.” Dr. Yassiff moved again to give the girl the IV. She screamed again. Jack exploded.

“I thought it was supposed to help.” Jack gripped the table resisting the two goons pulling on him that he had not noticed enter the room. Redburke was one of them. The other beefy man’s tag read, “Horm.” The girl screamed again arching off the table against her restraints. The doctor watched on pitifully as if he had long since been defeated unable to fight anything. Why would he not help her?

“Do something!” Jack demanded.

“She’ll be alright in a moment.” The doctor said sadly.

The girl struggled against her restraints and sobbed. A few moments later she lay limp and whimpered. Jack relaxed some. Horm and Redburke relaxed their hold on him stepping away. Jack seized his opportunity and hurried back to her side.

“What did you do to her?” Jack asked again as he scanned her face trying to determine her current status. “What did you put into her?” Jack glared at the doctor.

The doctor motioned to the goons waiting on standby in the back of the room, and they grabbed Jack again. Redburke was ready, and Horm was apparently used to struggling patients because Jack fought them but to no avail. They managed to maneuver Jack onto another examination table parallel to the girl’s and strapped him down.

“I put the same serum in her that I am going to put in you.”

With that simple statement, the tired-sounding doctor slipped an enormous needle in Jack’s arm. The second the doctor began to slowly push the foreign substance into his bloodstream, Jack realized a pain so great that he would never forget it. Jack understood the girl’s need to scream. Jack hollered in agony for all he was worth. He felt as though it would never end. Finally the needle was removed, but the pain remained.

A prick later and another substance, and he thought his vein was going to rupture. This substance pushed at the serum, slowly working into it, breaking it down. Jack writhed on the table groaning so hard that his throat became sore, and he had a migraine. At last the IV won and the serum no longer clumped in his veins. Such an odd buzz remained. Laying limp Jack breathed heavily.

At some point Jack must have nodded off being so depleted of energy after the whole ordeal. Watching the girl in so much pain and experiencing it himself was just too much. The girl. Groggily Jack looked for her on the other table. The room was dark except for a single bulb illuminating the underside of some cabinets on the opposite side of the room from him.

Looking at the girl Jack waited for his eyes to focus. Soon he saw that she was squinting back at him. Her hazel eyes widened slightly. Apparently she had realized that he was awake also.

“Who are you?” Jack croaked with effort. She opened her mouth in reply but nothing came out. Grimacing she tried again.

“Stephanie,” she whispered. She had a gentle look about her, with an underlying strength. “Who are you?” She faltered.

“Jack” his voice cracked.

“That was awful.” Stephanie whispered with a shiver. Jack shuddered in agreement. “What’s going to happen to us?”

Jack frowned back at her. “I don’t know.” He responded. Concentrating on how he felt, Jack realized he was just tired. Testing his arms and legs he was pleased to find that their restraints had been removed. Again he tested his limbs by swinging his legs over the side of the table and attempted to raise himself with his arms. Jack grunted in frustration. They weren’t ready to hold any weight. Jack rested a few moments longer before working as raising himself again.

Stephanie whispered. “Are you alright?”

Jack grunted his affirmation while trying to raise himself. He still could not do it, even with Stephanie’s quiet encouragement. Losing patience and time, Jack growled and glared at the examination table. Everything took on a goldish-green hue strangely. Stephanie gasped. Jack swung his gaze in her direction fearing someone had already come for them. She was staring fearfully at him from the back wall while hovering in the air. What in the world?

“Stephanie, how are you doing that?” She shook her head and pressed further into the wall which appeared to swallow her a little. What nightmare had they stepped into? By the way she was looking at him there must be something different about him too. Beginning to think rationally the yellow/green haze that had covered his vision began to lift, and in moments he could see just fine again. Stephanie released a relieved breath, slipping from the wall and fluttering toward the floor like a large feather.

Suddenly adrenaline kicked in and Jack had the energy for action. Before he knew it he was catching Stephanie out of the air just before she collided with the floor. Jack and Stephanie stared at each other in bewilderment.

“How did you do that? Why was I falling? Why did your eyes change color? What did they put into us?!” Stephanie panicked.

Jack nodded. “All good questions... But, let’s quickly figure out our new assets and use them to get out of here before they get back.” Unfortunately just as Jack had finished speaking, the two goons, Horm and Redburke, were already back with the doctor trailing behind.

“You’re both awake.” Dr. Yassiff noticed aloud in a monotone voice. He motioned to the goons, and they replaced Jack and Stephanie on their examination tables, strapping them in place once again. Despite the occasional question Jack demanded an answer to, Dr. Yassiff ignored Jack and continued on rummaging through drawers and placing a few items on a tray as if he had not heard him at all. Jack and Stephanie exchanged glances. Jack’s eyes showed annoyance while Stephanie still appeared shaken from all that had taken place.

Finally, Dr. Yassiff turned toward them trailing the tray on wheels carrying the instruments of the trade he had collected. The doctor proceeded to take their vitals and give them an overall checkup.

When he finished, he scribbled his signature on their forms with a flourish. Putting everything away, Yassiff ensured their restraints were secure once more, and he and the goons disappeared again without another word. Alone, Jack and Stephanie stared at each other in bewilderment. Jack's brow furrowed.

"I've had it with these people. No answers for seven years. Stuck in the same routine: wake up, eat, workout, eat, workout, tests, eat, sleep, and start over the next day. Now they 'graduate' us, fill us with some wicked awful serum, and still no answers!" Jack hollered that final bit. Stephanie cringed. Jack mumbled an apology.

"Your eyes have changed again." She mentioned softly. Jack's eyes widened as he just noticed his surroundings had changed color. "What's different?" She asked just as softly as before. Turning his attention to her, Jack's vision exploded with light. Wincing Jack quickly squeezed his eyes shut opening a little at a time until it was bearable. "What?" Stephanie pressed.

"Everything is a yellowish-green color, and you're glowing very bright." Jack explained slowly. Surprised Stephanie regarded herself for a moment.

"No, I'm not." She answered. With effort Jack cleared his vision to regard her in normal light. She wasn't glowing any more.

"Can you see different than normal?" Jack asked. She shook her head. Jack changed his eyesight again. This time he looked at himself. He also glowed. "Hmm. Interesting. When I look at either of us with my new eyesight we both glow. This could be very useful. I'm going to practice switching between visions so that I can check out the good doctor and the goons around here. Knowing who's 'special' and who isn't is kinda nice."

Stephanie grinned. "Yeah that would be nice... Goons, Jack?"

"Yeah." Jack quirked a half grin at her. "What else would you call these muscle men hired to be jerks?"

"Muscle men?" Stephanie suggested with a shy giggle.

Jack smirked. "No way. They're definitely goons." Stephanie snorted and pressed her lips together. "Alright now I need to concentrate. I want to be able to really have this down before the good doc gets back with his henchmen." Stephanie kept silent letting him focus. Jack hunkered down on his table, staring intently at the ceiling and concentrated. A fierce glare fell over his countenance as he focused on switching his vision back and forth.

Fifteen minutes later Dr. Yassiff, Horm, and Redburke returned. Jack kept track of their movements looking for a chance to check whether they had helped themselves to some of that awful serum. The doctor, after checking Jack and Stephanie, went to rummaging for a pen since his had apparently gone missing. Seeing the opportunity to check the status of his opponents, Jack switched his vision and glanced around the room avoiding Stephanie. None of the men glowed. This posed another question in Jack's mind. Why would they not partake of the serum themselves? What are these people's plan?

Jack felt like a volcano rumbling on the inside preparing to erupt with all of the built-up frustration from unanswered questions. Growling under his breath, Jack huffed. The shadow of Horm fell across Jack's face. Quickly Jack made sure that his eyes were normal before he glared back up at Horm. Horm merely grunted in return lifting a lip in annoyance.

Dr. Yassiff walked back over with a new pen at last and started making notes on his clip board while glancing at them periodically. At last he sighed scribbling another signature before looking up at them.

“Congratulations. You have both officially graduated from the Conditioning Phase to the Development Phase. You’ll both come with me, please.” Dr. Yassiff turned and made his way from the room. As soon as he spoke Redburke and Horm began to release Jack and Stephanie from their bonds. This was done with an efficiency that spoke of much practice. Horm and Redburke followed the doctor, who was leading the way, pushing the two bewildered “patients” in front of them.

Dr. Yassiff led them down a series of hallways, through a door, and a security check complete with an eye scan before Jack and Stephanie were shoved into a great white expanse filled with people. Many more “patients” stared back at the new arrivals. Because Jack and Stephanie could not see everyone from just inside the door, the sea of heads could easily out-number 200 people. That only included those that they could see in *this* room. Many more people entered and exited several other doors surrounding the immediate room and a few hallways branched off at the back. There were literally hundreds milling around in this branch of the compound.

Jack flipped his sight to gold momentarily, out of curiosity. This confirmed his suspicions nearly making him blind from the mighty glow from the all of the others filling the room. Everyone in this section of the compound had been injected with the serum. This plan (whatever it was) had been in operation for a long time. So much longer than the seven years he had been cooped up in there.

Jack looked over at Stephanie and sympathized with her shocked expression.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOHN SIGHED with relief at the first mate's call of land ahead. Two and a half weeks was long enough to be cooped up with smelly sailors. John was ready for some new sights. He also wanted to hurry to find that girl before those sorry excuses for men nabbed her. Hopefully their contact in the States has not already discovered their mistake and gone after her. That would make things a little more difficult – pushing back his vacation even further. John growled at the potential of further aggravation towards these jerks.

This was not the first time John had hoped the other men in the States were merely waiting for the two aboard this cargo ship. He had read over passages about prayer in his search for the Truth the night before. John's *mor* had taught him to pray when he was a *lite barn*. Those memories had come rushing back. John had tested out the old habit as if it were a rusted gear needing oil this morning.

Rusty or no John had a gut feeling it was doing some good. How much? He was not sure, but he was willing to give it a go until he found the girl at least. Maybe this can possibly nail down whether or not he was praying in vain.

Thankfully the hour and a half it took for the captain to bring the cargo ship into port at Port Bayonne in New Jersey slipped by quickly. John grabbed his bags and made his way up to the deck. There he casually kept an eye on Hot Head and Exasperated Eddie, whom he found out by further talking to their translator that their names were Harry and Edward.

Harry barely allowed half a day to slip by without chewing Edward out for something. After a while Edward got smart avoiding him by helping out or visiting with some of the sailors. John figured Edward had to be resenting the insatiable man by now.

If by some fluke Harry was listed as a future job reference for Edward, Edward would not have a chance. Hopefully Edward will be reassigned to another partner for his sake. John began to avoid Harry also, strictly extracting information from their translator because Harry's voice was quickly grating on John's nerves.

All the men aboard the ship followed the captain and his first mate down the plank onto solid ground at last. John grunted in contentment shifting the weight of his bag across his back keeping Harry and Edward in his peripheral. Harry paid the translator while Edward collected their bags, a duffel each.

When everything was settled, John sauntered after them keeping them in his sights, but he kept a few wandering souls between them and himself. John had done well to keep from rising suspicion in them. He was not about to blow it now.

Finally, they seemed to find their destination. Oddly, it looked to be a public library. After ambling up the stairs six paces behind the two men he was following, John was surprised to find that the building really was a public library. Looking around, John pulled out a few books that caught his eye.

Harry and Edward were not in any hurry to get where they were going. They must be meeting the boss. With a failure of this magnitude – looking for the girl in the wrong country – John would not want to face his boss either, if he had had one.

At last Harry and Edward bit the bullet and found the door they were avoiding. Grumbling Harry punched in a code and yanked the door open wide. Edward deflated, exhaling a sigh that had apparently been building since entering the library.

Since John knew that he was not going to be able to effectively follow them past this doorway, he knew that he had to act quickly if he was going to find out what would take place back there. He sidled up as close as he could, careful to stay out of their sight behind a bookshelf. Then at the last moment John snuck a small listening device on the back of Edward's jacket as he passed through the door behind Harry. Swiftly John swung his attention to some random book to appear occupied. Then at the click of the door shutting behind the men, John pulled out a baggy from one of the front pockets on his duffel. Digging around in it John found an earpiece about the size of a dime and stuck it in his right ear. Instantly John could hear Harry's constant complaining loud and clear. For real, did the man ever take a breath? Definitely a "half empty" sort of a fellow. John groaned at the prospect of listening to Harry continue to berate Edward for being a moron and how stupidly unfair it was that he would be taking the fall with Edward, the partner he had not even wanted from the beginning. This was supposed to be Harry's big chance at moving up in the big man's favor, clearly a fail.

Edward stayed silent as was his norm. John watched Edward in an attempt to read his thoughts on his face. As far as John could see, there was a good chance Edward wanted to slit Harry's throat to put an end to the continuous criticism. Other times John wondered if Edward had mastered a sort of zoning out technique in order to block the other man out completely. A man would have to develop something like that to be around Harry to have any hope of keeping some sanity intact.

Finally and at last! After what seemed like hours of listening to Harry and so many doors opening and closing, they seemed to have found their destination. A knock and a new voice came through John's earpiece.

"Come in." A male's voice invited almost serenely if not for a barely discernible edge that clipped the "n" too short. Silently Harry and Edward entered. Immediately Harry started in. He sounded just like a petulant child tattling on his brother.

"Enough." Snarled the new voice that had bade them to enter. The serenity he had attempted before had vanished. "What?! Are you but children?" The man seethed speaking John's thoughts. John snorted in amusement. "Are you but little boys running in circles bickering over childish things? Ignoring your responsibilities? Simple I will add... Where is the girl?" The man did not wait. "Here!" He bellowed. "Where were you?" Again there was no pause. "Norway?!" The man exclaimed something unintelligible. John decided he was grateful that he did not understand since there was a very high possibility of the man cursing with the way the conversation was going so far.

Edward surprised John by speaking up. "I'm sorry, sir, for the mistake. I failed to trust the correct informant this time 'round it would seem." A moment's pause. "I hope this won't have completely destroyed your faith in us. I am aware of where the girl is now. Might we have another chance?" John was stunned. This was the most John had ever heard from Edward all at once. Apparently he was not the only one surprised. Harry was quiet for once, and a small rush of air seemed to come from the other side of the room through the earpiece. Mystery Man must have been prepared for another onslaught towards the other two, but Edward's humble reply seemed to deflect his boss's next attack of insults.

"I know where the girl is." Mystery Man sounded somewhat deflated. "Ben has gone to collect her with some of his men."

Grumbles and growls of frustration could be heard from Harry and Edward over losing their job to this man, Ben. There was the harsh whisper as a door brushed over carpet. A bit of shuffling could be heard as heavy boots dragged along. Paper crinkled, and then there was a short pause as though all breathing in the room seemed to stop in anticipation.

"What?!" Mystery Man roared. Something crashed. "Imbeciles! All of you!" He huffed deeply as if he truly mourned his men's IQ statuses. "Go." He said tiredly. "Ben lost her somewhere in the Scranton area. Bring her to me. I'll be staying on the island for the next couple of days, but then I will be back. Though, I won't be expecting either of you before I get back." He said pessimistically.

Bingo! John now knew where to look and could leave off trailing these basket cases. Things were looking up! John smirked in satisfaction.

When Henry and Edward exited the door they had entered for their "secret" meeting with Mystery Man, John snatched back his listening device while the oblivious men started back through the maze of books. John hustled out of the library to begin his search for the girl anew in the Scranton area. He discovered her name to be Kellie before the meeting ended with Mystery Man.

CHAPTER FIVE

KELLIE CLUTCHED the piece of paper that Alison had scrolled out instructions for her on. After breakfast Kellie had called the police and they had sent out a man and woman officer. The woman officer took Kellie's statement and description of the men after her and a description of her friend, Hannah. They promised to get on the case right away, but gave her permission to go on home. The officers informed her that they would be sending the case file on over to the police department in her area as well.

Kellie peered at signs and buildings trying to decipher where she was. Alison and Duncan had to go to work, or they would have showed her where to go. They did; however, supply her with the money she needed to board her train.

Kellie was surprised at their suggesting this mode of transportation, but they were right in thinking that Mr. Richmen wouldn't be looking for her here since it's a less popular choice nowadays.

Kellie sighed in relief as she looked up to realize she had finally found the train station. Quickly she glanced around her and stepped inside with a quick prayer for guidance.

Looking around Kellie located the ticket master and made her way toward him. She cleared her throat, and he looked up at her expectantly. She whispered an apology then ploughed ahead.

"Excuse me. How close can I get to Scranton on your train?" Kellie asked quietly. The ticket master's eyebrows rose in interest.

"Well, miss, I'd say within ten miles or so of there." He answered.

"Really?!" Kellie beamed. "That's great! I'd like a ticket for that train, please." The ticket master rung up her purchase and handed her her ticket wishing her a pleasant trip. Kellie thanked him then turned away to study her ticket to find out which gate was hers. Kellie maneuvered her way around clusters of people and bolted down chairs in search of her gate number. At last she found it with a sigh of relief.

Kellie showed her ticket and walked through. Once through the gate Kellie again glanced at her ticket for her car number. The train was not in yet, so she walked along the numbers painted on the pavement until she found hers. When she did, she checked the time and prepared to wait out the next ten minutes until her train arrived.

As Kellie waited, she began to pray. "Dear Lord, please help me get home safely. Help me to know what to do when I get there. Keep Hannah safe, please." Her train pulled in. "Please, Lord! Amen." Kellie boarded her train feeling a peace claim her heart. "Thank you, Lord." She smiled. Everything

would be ok. Kellie mused on how she would manage those last ten miles to Scranton as she hunkered down for the two-hour train ride.



When Kellie's train reached her destination, she immediately went in search of a map. Alison had told her about a friend of hers that could take her the rest of the way to Scranton. Now she just needed to find out how to get to that friend... Or, she paused in thought, Alison had told her that she had called her friend in advance to let them know of Kellie's arrival. Kellie looked around.

"I wonder if there's such a thing as a pay phone around?" Kellie huffed to herself bemoaning the fact that she had dropped her purse with her phone in it in the limo when she made her great escape. "Oh, let it go!" She scolded herself. "It would have been dead by now, and you know it. So, stop sniveling and deal. Let's problem-solve. You need a phone, so find one." Kellie looked around again but a little harder this time. She dug around in her pocket for some change in case she found a pay phone. Not finding any change in the first pocket she tried the other one. She found a crumpled piece of paper instead. "Oh! Alison's instructions. Duh!" She must have put them in there to keep them safe during the train ride.

"Travis and his wife said they would take you to Scranton. Promised to pick you up when the train gets in. Wait by the left side of the entrance." Alison had written.

Kellie moaned and searched for the time. When did the train get in? How much time have I wasted? She fretted as she glanced around in search of the time, giving up after a minute, not wanting to waste anymore time. Kellie moved hurriedly for the entrance of the train station. Frustrated with herself for not knowing what to do when she got off the *two hour* train ride, Kellie began to over-think the meaning of the instructions. Did she tell them the left side from walking *in* or from walking *out*?

Kellie's brow furrowed as a stress headache began to set in. *How will I know them? How will they know me? Oh man... why didn't I double check on these details?! Oh, Kellie, you know why. You didn't want to be a further bother as Alison rushed to help you and get to work on time.* Kellie huffed as the never-ending thoughts of doubt bombarded her from all sides. This was not helping. She pushed through another couple that did not see her and dodged another vacationing family.

Finally, she was close to the entrance. Kellie did not see anyone looking for someone else at first. When she made it to the entrance she stood in the middle and scoured the faces around her. Kellie scanned all the faces milling around her once... twice... even three times before she was positive all the people waiting around the entrance were not the couple looking for her.

Usually one to stay out of the way, Kellie stood her ground in the middle of the entrance. Travis and his wife had to be here, and she did not want to miss them. She *had* to get to Scranton. Kellie began to worry that she had taken too long to reach the entrance, and they had already gone.

Kellie continued to wait for them for a few more minutes while she searched the nearby faces once more. She was getting more agitated by the second. As a passing thought or last resort, (she did not know which in the moment) Kellie made her way outside to take a look. Just as Kellie emerged from the station, she caught a glimpse of a couple just turning away in what appeared to be disappointment after searching the faces around them. That *had* to be Travis and his wife!

Kellie lurched into action pushing and dodging through the crowds of people after them. Once or twice she lost sight of them. When she thought that she was close enough, she would call out to them. Sometimes they would turn and look. Other times, they would not as if they did not hear her. Each time they turned to look they never saw her waving because another unknown individual or cluster of people would pass in front of her.

Kellie huffed in frustration. She felt as though she were running in a dream – never getting any closer to her destination. But, thankfully she was not in a dream, for she did make it to her destination eventually. As a passing thought, it seemed odd to Kellie that the majority of the activity would occur outside of the train station rather than inside.

With what effort she had left, Kellie pushed her legs to go faster to catch up to Travis and his wife. *Lord, she prayed, please let this couple be the right people. They are my ticket to Scranton.* Kellie's face had scrunched up as she ran and pled with God.

So close! They were right there at last. Kellie caught up to them just as they were about to turn the corner. Huffing and puffing, she tapped them both on the shoulder. The couple turned in surprise. It's funny. Kellie knew them to be married, but they easily could have been twins, brother and sister. Both of them had brown hair and eyes like the crayon, and they both were pretty average looking Americans.

"Yes?" The woman inquired while Kellie gulped air in an attempt to catch her breath.

"Are you –," Kellie broke off gasping one last time. "— Travis and Michelle by chance?"

The woman's eyes brightened in recognition. "You must be Kellie?" She asked hesitantly glancing at her husband. He glanced back before squinting his eyes in the sunlight for a better look at Kellie.

Kellie's face broke into a large grin. She nearly doubled over in her relief. These were Alison's friends! Kellie sent up a prayer of thanks before answering Michelle. "Yes, I'm Kellie. I'm so glad I caught you! Alison said that you two were willing to take me to Scranton?" Kellie asked hopefully.

Michelle smiled in delight. "My husband and I are more than happy to help. We are actually on our way there ourselves, so it is not out of our way." She answered cheerily.

Kellie sighed happily. "I really appreciate you guys helping me out. Honestly, I can't thank you enough!"

"It's really no trouble at all." Travis piped up. "Just like Michelle said."

"Absolutely no trouble!" Michelle added for good measure as she and her husband led the way to their car.

Just as they turned to wait to cross the street Kellie glanced to the side for a better view of her peripheral. A couple held a piece of paper between them and periodically glanced up at the train station. They seemed worried about something. The couple came close enough for Kellie to hear part of their conversation.

"I know I wrote the instructions down correctly, Travis! I asked her to repeat them, for crying out loud." The woman huffed in frustration.

"Do you think the girl stood us up then?" The man asked equally exasperated.

"Maybe Kellie understood them differently..." The woman trailed. "I just don't know."

“Well, I know I need to get to work, so unfortunately we need to leave now. We can’t wait any longer, Michelle.”

What are the odds of two couples at the same train station having the same names were looking for the same girl? Kellie wondered at the coincidence. Just as a niggling feeling began to wiggle itself into her conscious, her Travis and Michelle ushered her quickly across the road through the traffic to their car.

CHAPTER SIX

“ALL RIGHT. Well, then.” Jack clapped his hands together effectively gaining Stephanie’s attention. “So, first, we discover our full abilities. Second, we discreetly choose someone to help us escape. We’re going to need more manpower, obviously, if we want to take down this twisted operation.”

Stephanie turned her shocked expression on him now. “Take down the operation?”

“Of course.” Jack responded resolutely.

“But...” Stephanie gaped.

“Stephanie. We’ve got to. The authorities back home only know that they have an endless stack of missing persons cases. They don’t know where to look and more-than-likely have given up.” Jack looked at Stephanie’s frightened and crest-fallen expression in sympathy. “Look, we’re our and their only hope.” He gestured to the others in the room. Stephanie’s eyes held a myriad of emotions until finally determination settled over her features.

“Alright, Jack. Let’s get to work.” Stephanie said. “We should probably find the crowd working on their abilities the most and mingle with them so as not to stand out. Especially, since we’re undoubtedly on camera in this section.”

“That’s a good idea and observation...” Jack thought out loud. “Actually... maybe because we’re on camera we *shouldn’t* hang with those people.

Stephanie only stared in question trying to follow his logic.

“They’re probably watching those groups for the ones they want to pull for training for the next level.” Jack explained. “Hanging with them will more than likely draw unwanted attention to us.” He paused to let this sink in and further gather his thoughts. “If we practice quietly together then there’s probably a better chance we’ll be left alone.”

“I agree.” Stephanie finally nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll need to work fast to catch them off guard.”

“Yep.” Jack nodded. He sighed taking in their surroundings. “I think our first step should be to get familiar with this part of the compound and all of these people. If we’re going to make this work, we’re going to need some allies.”

Stephanie sighed at the enormity of what they had decided to accomplish. She took a deep breath then stared intently at the faces all around them as if she could determine friend or foe just by looking at them. Jack huffed out a mirthless laugh at the formidable task ahead of them.

Jack and Stephanie made their way through the crowd of people in an attempt to explore what would be their new temporary home. Both kept their eyes ever-wandering, cataloging away in their minds all the details of the walls, doors, and some of the behaviors of the people around them.

One thing they both noticed: no one seemed to pay any attention to them since their initial arrival. Many gave the impression that they had given up hope long ago of ever getting out, and so they have gotten accustomed to new faces coming in. This was no longer a new occurrence from the looks of the sheer number of people gathered just in the main room. This group as a whole seemed hopeless and mostly lined the walls of the main room conversing amongst themselves.

Another group seemed to be making the most of their situation in life. These people had the appearance of just hanging out. They laughed, teased, and even seemed to have made up games to pass the time. They did not seem to be using their abilities during these games. Jack checked with his new eyesight, and they did have the serum in them. They must be in denial after what these evil monsters had done to them.

Then there were pockets of what appeared to be cliques of about five to seven in a group who were actively practicing their abilities. Jack and Stephanie exchanged glances whenever they passed one of these groups. They both made a mental note to steer clear of these people.

When Jack and Stephanie finally made it to the back of the larger room, investigation showed each hallway led even further into the compound. Room after room after room branched off these hallways. Periodically men's and women's bathrooms would break up the seemingly never ending hallway of rooms. These rooms all appeared to be the same after Jack and Stephanie checked a few. Each room held a bunk on both the left and right wall and two straight chairs lining the back wall with a table in between. One single uncovered light bulb glowed from the ceiling in the center. There was not a light switch in the room. The lights must be set to a timer. Outside each door-less room a number was posted. The first door on the right of each hallway began with a hundred. The first hallway began with 100 and the fifth and final hallway began with 500.

Jack and Stephanie were speechless. There were 599 rooms down there. What were these people planning? They asked themselves this question not for the first time. Jack and Stephanie backed out of the last hallway.

"Well, if the vast crowd we saw outside was any indication, these people are planning to hold an amazing number of people kidnapped down here." Stephanie noted sounding out of breath. "I knew this horrible place was big, but... I never dreamed in my worst nightmare it would be this big!" Jack raised his eyebrows at her. Stephanie continued haltingly. "I sort of... have been praying that... I've either been the only poor soul kidnapped, or... at least that there... were only a few of us."

"Wishful thinking." Jack said flatly, and Stephanie glared. "Did you not see anyone else while you were out there?" Jack asked in bewilderment gesturing toward the entrance they were shoved through. Stephanie shook her head. "How?"

"I was kept in a much bigger room than these." She began and gestured to the hallway closest to them. "I was never allowed to leave. I exercised, ate, slept, and was tested in that room until I was taken out for the first time to be injected. They called it a 'graduation'. I'm not sure if I'm glad or

not. Though I don't think I want to find out what happens when one doesn't 'graduate'..." She scrunched her face in disgust.

"Hm." Jack said taking in what she had just said. "Odd. I was taken out to exercise and be tested. Between transfers I would pass others like us in the halls. Anyways, we should get back to what we were doing and take a look at what's behind these four doors over here." Stephanie nodded tiredly as they moved towards the first of the four doors.

Jack tried one of the knobs. It did not turn. They frowned. Jack tried the other doors. None of their knobs turned. He huffed. His brow puckered in frustration.

"Why have these doors in here if they're off limits?" He asked Stephanie. She shrugged. They stared at the doors in thought dozing in and out in exhaustion of all that had happened to them today.

"Wait!" Jack exclaimed. Stephanie jumped, startled from her thoughts. Jack slapped a palm to his forehead. "You can go through them!"

"What?! Shhh!" Stephanie shushed him incredulous. "No, I can't." She added in a whisper.

"Yes, you can." Jack contradicted. Stephanie shook her head disagreeing. "I saw you do it." She stared back askance.

"When that doctor put the serum in us, you got scared when you saw my eyes change. You flew up and halfway into the wall."

"Really?" Stephanie gaped and turned to look at the door as if just noticing it. She looked at her hand then at the door. Taking a deep breath she reached a shaking hand toward the door. Jack grabbed her hand before she got near it. She jumped.

"Wait a minute!" Jack hissed at her looking around. "Cameras. There's got to be some in here." Stephanie's mouth opened in a perfect "O" shape. They both glared at the ceilings looking along where the wall met the ceiling. Jack snorted in frustration. "There *has* to be a camera in here somewhere..."

"There is." Stephanie said softly as if the people watching from the other side of the camera could hear them. She squinted intently at a spot in the left corner of the room. Jack squinted.

"Where?" He asked. Stephanie looked at Jack's eyes gauging where he was looking. "Where?" He asked again. Stephanie licked her lips concentrating. She lifted her hand to show him, but stopped herself. Looking around she whispered softly trying not to move her lips.

"There. In the left corner. Where the wall meets the ceiling. It's there. It's very small. Hard to see." Stephanie flicked her eyes in the camera's direction. She subtly lifted her finger in the camera's direction for good measure before turning to look somewhere else.

Jack looked at Stephanie then sighed. Adjusting his stance, he glared at the spot Stephanie said the camera was. He continued to glare at it until finally he saw it. A small, black spot made obvious as his vision suddenly zoomed in on it. The room around him was curtained in a yellow haze. He blinked. The room was white again. The camera nearly disappeared again. Ah, nice. His new eyesight not only shows who has been affected by the serum, but also it brings things closer, almost like binoculars.

When Jack turned to look at Stephanie to tell her about it, his eyes glazed over again while he turned so that he saw some interesting things. As his eyes passed over the hallways, he could see all the way down the length of them. He could clearly see people walking in and out of the rooms. Jack saw all this in mere seconds in each hallway.

When Jack's eyes focused on the door in front of him, it was as if his mind entered the room without the rest of him. Now, he could see inside the room. What he saw confused him. The empty room beyond was too wide to be a hallway, but it was very long with a floor-to-ceiling mirror that ran the length of the room. In fact without even thinking about it, Jack somehow looked through the wall opposite the mirror and discovered the length of the room matched the length of the hallway.

Moved with further curiosity, Jack looked beyond the mysterious mirror and saw three metal chairs lined up in the center of the mirror looking into the large empty room. Two large computer stations stood in each opposite corner on either side of the three chairs. A door in the far wall signified this is where the observers came in. Observers. Jack blinked nearly losing concentration. The rooms were observation rooms. The three other doors...? Quickly Jack slid his mind through the last three rooms to find that they were all the same.

Jack blinked again to find Stephanie staring in concern and snapping her fingers in his face. Jack blinked once more, still too deep in thought to explain. He closed his fist around her hand that was snapping at him and held up a finger with his other hand gesturing for her to give him a minute to think. Stephanie went from concerned to confused. Jack scanned above the door frames, then the ceilings around the big room. There. Propped above the door that he and Stephanie had been shoved through was a speaker box. Jack huffed a triumphant chuckle. Answers. Albeit not the ones he necessarily wanted, yet – but they were answers nonetheless.

CHAPTER SEVEN

So, FOR some people having only a name would make the search pretty much impossible. For someone used to searching for something with a name as their sole lead, this is not impossible – just a headache.

The plan is to locate where in Scranton Kellie is. Then, John needs to know what these guys are doing messing with her.

So, first-step: Find a café near a private investigator. John smirked then started walking briskly as he opened his Maps app on his phone. John started whistling to himself while thinking that it felt good to have someone else on his mind. He did not feel quite so alone amongst the other billions that roamed this world. John sniffed at his way of thinking. He did not mind being alone.

Really it was just nice to have a new priority other than “get rich quick.” Helping this girl gave John a new sense of purpose – even though he really did not know this girl – yet. He still determined that Kellie would be pretty for all the trouble he was going through for her.

In about ten minutes flat, John located a café across from a local P.I.’s office. To his relief, he was not the only one taking advantage of the free WiFi. It would have been too easy for the investigators to catch on to him, cutting short his opportunity to find out whatever there was to know about this *Kellie-pike*.

John fired up his laptop and ordered himself something to drink. This way his conscious would not interfere. He really needed to concentrate if he wanted to get all the information that he could. Paying for something made him feel a little better about the laws he was breaking right now.

The problem was he really did not have the time to go in and formally ask for the investigator’s services. They would promise to help for a not-so-small commission, only for them take too long to use their own database. Then they would get back to him *maybe* tomorrow if by some miracle his case became top priority. John had heard it all before.

So, instead of waiting for the middle man to make a move, John learned how to use their tools for himself. He never did have the patience to wait on someone else. “Do it yourself” had been his motto for as long as he could remember.

“OK, so I need a face to go with the name, so I can spot her in Scranton. She’s not from Scranton, so where is she from?” John racked his brain for all the information he had picked up from eavesdropping on those two fellows on the boat ride from Norway.

Unfortunately, he did not glean much. After all, most of the time they bickered or kept away from each other. John did not blame them. Such a blunder was bound to raise up some hot frustrations

on both parts. Because of so little contact between the two, John could only remember one useful piece of information. Yassiff. Yes, that was it. Yassiff was the girl's last name: Kellie Yassiff. Now, we are getting somewhere.

John entered the name, Kellie Yassiff, into the P.I.'s database and grinned when he found what he needed. He now had an address, her parents' names, and even her social security number. He did not really need her social.

John always marveled at the information law enforcements had at the push of a button. John shuddered at the violation of privacy. He took comfort that the address they had on him no longer was accurate.

Not normally part of his character, John almost felt bad for infringing on Kellie's privacy. *I'm only trying to help*, he told himself. Then he laughed at the irony. The law enforcement probably used the same excuse.

Before John logged out, he decided he had time to play out a hunch. He entered the name, Dr. Mark Yassiff – her *far*, into the database. What he found caused John's eyebrows to rise in surprise.

"Ah, *så*, you're the one they're really after! Grab the daughter for the *far*'s cooperation." John deduced.

Dr. Mark Yassiff is a biochemist, John read, known for his research in developing and mutating human cells. From the looks of things he was successful, but he had yet to publish his work. Dr. Yassiff had fallen off the grid years ago without a trace. Mother and daughter devastated and left behind. According to the most recent info listed the family never moved. This was partially in the hopes that Mark would come home. He never did. Kellie is still single and living with her mother. This information was a few years dated past.

John huffed as he sat back to digest what he had just read while he sipped his drink. Almost as an afterthought, he remembered to shut down and put away his laptop just in case the investigators' I.T. guys had picked up on him piggybacking their signal.

So, these bullies were after Kellie only to get their way with her *far*. Her *far*, whom they have already captured... This was obvious because a biochemist with a successful discovery for science – a notable award guaranteed – and what seems to be a loving family at home would not just pick up and leave without good cause. This means he was kidnapped or blackmailed to leave.

Mark must be losing motivation to continue working for them after all these years if they need Kellie. The only reason that the doctor losing steam would cause his captors to take action would be a deadline. When was the deadline? What are they up to? Why does this operation seem bigger the deeper John digs for information? Who are they?

"I am getting way too involved in something messy." John scowled. "I was just supposed to save the *pika* from some bullies. Now, it looks like I'm saving her *far*, too." John suddenly felt fatigued. "All before I get to go on vacation." He began to feel like a spoiled child with his game station taken away.

The more John thought about what he was really tackling with essentially no benefit to him – besides his self-assurance that the girl would be pretty and would name him her hero – John was

surprised he was still considering this at all. The danger did not really phase him since he had always been a daredevil of sorts.

What really surprised him was the gradual return of energy as he thought of the accomplishment he would likely achieve by the end of the adventure. This would be the first time John Maynard decided to do something for someone else. It actually felt kind of good!

Now that he had that settled, John got up and prepared to leave to go find Kellie. Just as he was about to pay his check he realized that the abbreviation in Kellie's address was for Virginia. Well, shoot, he knew she was not in Virginia. John had just overheard that man say that she escaped near Scranton, and Scranton was here in New Jersey.

John paused. His eyebrows furrowed while he thought. OK, so Kellie is in Scranton. She has been kidnapped. She needs to get somewhere with people she trusts for help. Who would that be? She does not live here, so who does she know or would trust in her time of need?

With another hunch John turned his laptop on once more and looked up places where Dr. Yassiff had worked. John was able to find a short list of addresses. One of these locations were in Scranton, thank goodness.

Satisfied that this is where Kellie would go, John closed down the internet and put away his laptop again. John paid his bill and walked off to find a cab. On second thought, a bus would be cheaper. Yeah, take the bus to that end of town and then take the cab the rest of the way.

John whipped out his newly charged smart phone to locate a bus stop near him headed to the far side of town. Looks like he had some walking to do. John took a deep breath and took long strides in the direction of the bus stop listening to the prompts coming from his phone.

Reveling in the new purpose his life had taken, John began to whistle to himself. There was something satisfying in doing something for someone else. Thoughts of where he was going, and what he would be doing when he got there bounced continually around in his head as he walked.

By the time John arrived at the bus stop he had formulated quite a plan. He had also speculated a great many possibilities for which this mystery could unfold. Also he found out this particular bus stop had stopped running early because of technical difficulties. Apparently the mechanics had promised to have it up and running by the morning.

John's shoulders sagged at the setback and the heavy weight of his duffel slung across his back. Taking a quick look around he did not see a place to stay the night at first glance. So, he fired up his Maps app once again in search of sleep accommodations.

Thankfully there was a decent motel a block and a half away. Anything further and he would not have been able to walk through the entrance upright. Along the way John stopped and grabbed a bite to eat at a burger joint and something easy for breakfast from a dollar store.

Finally, John arrived and checked into his motel. John practically fell into the dim room. He dropped his duffel on the table by the one window and the sack with his breakfast in it on the chair beside it.

John kicked off his boots and was about to pull back the comforter when he remembered his quest for answers. He dug his Bible out of his duffel, threw the comforter off the end of the bed, pulled back the sheets, and stretched out on top of them.

John opened his Bible, and the first verse his eyes focused on was: Galatians 6:2 "Bear ye one another's burdens..." John smiled. He did not find the answers he was searching for, but he did get confirmation that what he was doing was a good thing helping Kellie and Mark.

John closed his eyes. He laid his Bible beside him and slept. He would get his answers soon. He knew it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“SO, KELLIE,” Michelle began in a friendly tone. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Virginia.” Kellie answered. “Just beneath the Washington D.C. area.”

“Oh wow!” Michelle’s eyebrows rose in interest. “How did you get here? You’re kind of a ways from home...”

“I was kidnapped with a friend from a charity event she had drug me to.” Kellie answered haltingly.

“Well, well.” Michelle’s lips pursed in sympathy. “Did your friend get away with you?”

“No. She was worried the men would hurt us. She wanted to wait for a better plan.”

“That was probably smart of her.” A look of relief seemed to pass over Michelle’s face. The moment was so brief, and Kellie was not really paying attention, so she doubted what she had seen. “Although, it would seem things are working out in your favor from the looks of things.” Michelle added after exchanging a look with her husband.

“Mm-hm.” Kellie hummed in agreement deciding to pay a little closer attention to this couple. She was beginning to get a bad feeling about her situation. After overhearing the other couple and her adrenaline draining away, Kellie began to see things in a little different light. This couple driving her seemed a little off. They seemed as if they might be hiding something. “It was really sweet of you both to help me out. Amanda is a great girl – very helpful. How do you guys know her?” Michelle glanced back quizzically. “She was rushing to work when she was trying to help me out and with making her call to you guys this morning, she really didn’t have much of a chance to talk to me.”

“Ah.” Michelle said cheerfully as she glanced at her husband again. The tick of concern Kellie just barely caught was gone in a flash. “Amanda. She is a nice girl. We like her immensely! She has always had that servant’s heart, you know?” She glanced back at Kellie. Kellie nodded in agreement with an encouraging smile. Michelle smiled back. “Her servant’s heart led to her helping us out when Travis’ mom passed away. It hit us hard.” Seemingly leftover heartbreak creased her forehead as she rubbed her husband’s arm. Kellie listened quietly. “Amanda brought over a friend, and they helped me with house cleaning and dog sitting while we were dealing with family matters.” Michelle finished with a subdued grin.

“Huh. Certainly sounds like her character.” Kellie smiled up at Michelle. “I’m so sorry to hear about your mother, Travis.” Travis nodded his thanks in the rearview mirror. “Was this recently?”

Michelle answered. “No... It’s been a little while. A couple of years by now...” She sighed.

"Hm." Wow. These people are so not Travis and Michelle. *Man! How did I fall in with the wrong people? Again? What is going on? Why are they lying? They obviously want me for some reason. I think they're probably running with the same crowd as Mr. Richmen. Things are really not going my way these days.* Kellie grumbled inwardly.

The longer the false friends of "Amanda" (a.k.a. Alison) drove they seemed to be getting more comfortable with Kellie. They began to mutter between themselves about things they probably would not want Kellie to overhear. They were definitely in cahoots with Richmen. Kellie groaned silently as she listened intently to their whispered conversation. She did her best not to be noticed as she listened and kept an eye out for a good opportunity to slip out of the car. Kellie did not want to be in the car when they reached their destination – wherever that was.

"That's good her friend didn't get away. That would have been another headache we would have to deal with." muttered the man impersonating Travis.

"Mitch, we only have her word for it." The fake Michelle answered. "For all we know the girl could have decided later to follow Kellie's example."

Kellie hoped so. She really did worry about Hannah. Was she alright? Have those terrible men hurt her in frustration over losing Kellie? She sure hoped not!

"Richmen really is a dolt." Mitch snorted. "At least we have the girl we need though. We're running out of time." He sighed heavily. "Delia, these idiots need to get their act together if we're ever going to finish what he hired us to do in the first place."

Kellie sent up a prayer for her friend just as the car pulled to a halt at a stop sign. Mitch, began growling in the driver's seat and honking his horn. Delia leaned forward in her seat and angrily shouted through the windshield. Apparently there was some congestion at this four-way stop sign.

Kellie watched as they both spat and ranted about this inconvenience. She licked her lips as she glanced at the lock on her door. Unlocked. Kellie's eyelids slid shut for a split second thanking God for this blessing. Thankfully, Mitch and Delia made enough racket themselves to distract from Kellie popping open the door and sliding to the pavement. Kellie crouched below the window and pushed the door shut just enough to latch softly.

Kellie licked her lips again as she looked for a crowd to disappear into. She nearly jumped out of her skin when the car drove away. She thought for a moment that Mitch or Delia had noticed and were going to shove her back into the car. Not wasting any more time crouching beside the road, Kellie sprinted to the nearest building and ducked inside in case they came back looking for her. She needed to regroup and figure out where she was going.

Mitch and Delia went on about the traffic inconvenience for a while longer before Delia sunk into the passenger seat as if under a great weight. She exhaled a large sigh. "We can only be in so many places at once." She mentioned picking up their previous conversation where they had left off.

Mitch nodded in agreement. "You know he won't take that into consideration."

"No. No, he won't." Delia agreed sulkily. "At least one thing is going our way though!" Delia grinned as she glanced back at the empty backseat of their car. "Mitch!" She shrieked.

"What?!" Mitch glanced over at his wife with a worried frown. He feared what she was going to say next.

“Mitch, she’s gone!” Delia spun around to look in the backseat hoping Kellie was just hiding. Perhaps she had overheard some things and was waiting for an opportune moment to escape again. Well, Delia did not know what she had overheard, but Kellie was most definitely gone.

“You *have* got to be kidding me!” Mitch slammed the steering wheel in frustration. “How, Delia?”

Delia shrunk in her seat again. “Don’t.” She said darkly. “Don’t blame this on me! Who didn’t lock the backdoor, huh?” She defended trying to shift the blame. Delia looked out the windows trying to see if she could spot Kellie somewhere close.

“How did we not hear her leave the car?” The anger coming off of Mitch was palpable. Delia merely huffed in frustration and kept her eye out for Kellie. By now Mitch had turned around, and they were backtracking. After an hour of searching the same stretch, Mitch and Delia gave up and drove on.

Delia looked at Mitch in wonder realizing where he was driving. “Where are we going?” Her eyes searched his imploringly. “I’m not going to him. I’m not going to him and telling him we had her, and she got away. Again.” She blabbered. “I’m not losing my reputation. Richmen – he never had a reputation to be concerned about. But... us... we have one. I won’t, Mitch, lose that.” She swallowed trying to calm herself.

Mitch glared harshly at her. “You need to shut up and take a breath. You’re an idiot if you think that I’m going to tell him that we had her at all.” Delia snapped her mouth shut with a frown. “Listen. We’re going in there, and I’m going to do all the talking. Understood?” Delia nodded just as Mitch pulled into the public library, the designated meeting place.

Mitch swaggered into the library as if he had no concern at all. Delia kept pace, but it was not until Mitch was entering the passcode that she got her nerves under control. Besides, how could he know? They only picked her up that morning. Mitch glanced back at Delia before entering through the door ahead of her.

Delia took a breath and followed squaring her shoulders as she did so. Let Mitch do the talking, she reminded herself. It will be fine. The boss does not know, and they will just go out and find Kellie after the meeting. Why was she so worked up?

Mitch and Delia continued on down the hallway and through the door leading to the meeting room. Delia always wondered why he kept the room so dark. There were two chairs facing a large desk. Mitch took one, and Delia followed suit in taking the other. With the assurance that she and Mitch would be finding Kellie after the meeting, Delia was completely composed. Mitch smiled his approval. Delia smiled back. Then he was there.

The newcomer entered the back of the room through a door neither Mitch nor Delia could see due to the shadows caused by the darkness of the room. The man took his seat at his desk and his body guards took their positions at the right and left hand corners on his side of the desk. The man seated behind the desk was cocky and comfortable in his position. He was a fit man in his late forties. His hair was black with graying sideburns. His eyes held steel and spoke of all he had seen and done. All of which he was proud that he had.

“You’re on time.” He smirked.

“As always.” Mitch answered sounding bored.

“Report?” The man on the other side of the desk sighed as if he was bored as well.

“We’ve located Kellie.”

“Ah! Where is she then?” The man perked up at this news.

“She’s in the city. We’re going to pick her up immediately following this meeting.” Mitch stated.

“Excellent. Wonderful assurance that I have *someone* I can count on.” The man sneered clearly implicating Richmen’s failure to pull through.

“Yes, sir.” Mitch answered pleased.

“Well, let’s not dilly-dally, shall we?” The man in the shadows said sarcastically, dismissing them as he departed with his bodyguards. Mitch stood, and Delia followed him out of the room. When they emerged from the library, Delia released a relieved giggle. Mitch raised his eyebrows at her. Delia shrugged.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Mitch teased her about her doubt. “Didn’t I tell you that all would be well?” He gloated.

“Yes, you did.” Delia smiled. “Yes, all is well. Now, let’s go get Kellie before your head swells too big for you to carry it.” With that she slung herself into the passenger seat before Mitch could fit in another jab. He chuckled in amusement as he dropped into the driver’s seat and backed out of the library parking lot. They were off to find Kellie. Their boss would be even more pleased and assured with their reliability when they delivered her.

CHAPTER NINE

“WHAT?” STEPHANIE said wide-eyed breaking into Jack’s thoughts. “You look like you’ve figured something out.”

“I think I did.” Jack smirked. But then his face fell. The more he thought about it the more his small victory lost its appeal.

“What’s the matter?” Stephanie’s excitement began to dim as well. “What was it you figured out?”

“Nothing really important the more I think about it. It’s not what their plan is or anything.” Jack sulked like a kid who was told today was Christmas, and it wasn’t. He gestured to the rooms near them. “I was able to see all the way down the hallways and behind the doors. They’re what I thought. They’re observation rooms. By the size of them, I’m thinking that they’re for observing us using our new gifts.”

Stephanie gaped at him and then scowled. “Why are you sulking? Wake up and put on your big boy pants! Did you hear yourself? You explored all of that from *right here*. How valuable is that?!” She paused letting her words sink in. Jack’s face relaxed as what Stephanie said sunk in.

“Yeah...” He said slowly nodding. “I’m picking up what you’re laying down. That’s huge!” He laughed. “We can form a real plan based off what I see of the compound right here without looking suspicious. “It’s perfect!” Stephanie nodded eagerly, glad Jack had pulled out of his pity-party moment.

“Yes! And you might even be able to check out each of our fellow inmates from wherever you are, too.” She searched his eyes for affirmation. Jack squinted his eyes in thought, nodding.

“You know, I think you’re right. If I can search a room and see what’s in it, then I should be able to look at the people’s faces and get an idea of their personalities. That way we don’t have to talk to each individual person. It would keep from someone noticing we were up to something.”

“Not to mention, I think this method should save us time,” Stephanie pointed out, “which is essential since speed is definitely the name of the game here. We need to get out of here ASAP. These people don’t need to be snatching anymore kids off the street.”

Jack nodded grimly. “These people have to be stopped!” He glared all around the room as if the bad guys were among them. The anger he held for them settled heavily in his gut. His vision began to change, matching his mood. All around him things took on a dark red hue. Stephanie looked on in concern as others first began to look at Jack as if searching for something. Then they all began to slowly get riled up.

Jack continued to let his anger fester completely unaware of the chaos he was about to unleash. After expressions of confusion and unease crossed over the faces of the individuals standing nearest Jack, a burning hatred began to fester within them as well. Stephanie could see the hot energy build in each of them as they shuffled their feet, rubbed hands together, and many clenched their fists. Eyes everywhere were looking for a target to unleash this fury. These negative feelings spread to those around them creating a larger and larger crowd of angry people about to wreak havoc as a collective mob.

Stephanie began to suspect that Jack's negative feelings were being transmitted to the minds of the others all around them. They did not know why they were angry, but they were. Jack needed to get himself under control before someone threw the first punch. Things were about to get really messy... She nudged Jack.

"Hey, I think you should stop that now..." She stammered nervously. Jack did not seem to notice. Standing directly in front of Jack's face, Stephanie huffed in frustration. She scrunched up her face in determination; her body poised to dodge a flying fist. Stephanie flicked Jack's nose as hard as she could then ducked.

Jack's glare swiveled toward her. Stephanie was too much on the defense for a punch that she was sure was coming that she did not notice when Jack's eyes changed back to their normal color. Stephanie took a look around her before rising up from her crouched position. In those furthest from Jack the anger lingered, but in the others nearest Jack she saw confusion on their faces almost immediately.

"What was that for?" Jack asked accusingly.

"It was for your – our – own good." Stephanie glared right back. Jack quirked an eyebrow at her. "We almost had a very large angry mob on our hands! All because of you, I might clarify!" Jack gaped back clearly not following. Stephanie forged on, riled up with adrenaline coursing through her. "Look, I'm just as angry as you at these evil, terrible people who have kidnapped all of us for who-knows-why. But, Jack, don't get careless and set this whole compound against us before we even get started taking these guys down, ok?" She inhaled a deep breath searching his eyes. Jack just stared back unable to formulate a thought based off what she had just said.

"I'm sorry...?" He ventured.

"I should hope so." Stephanie sighed. "I know we don't know exactly what this serum..." She looked down at herself as if she could see the vile yellow substance coursing through her right then "...does exactly, and clearly it does something different in each of us. But that's exactly why we should be extra cautious of our reactions to things as we've seen a couple of times today."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Ok, *Mother.*" He drawled sarcastically. Stephanie's eyes narrowed in offense.

"Hey, you're the one losing your cool. Somebody's got to keep you in check, if not you." She raised her eyebrows in challenge. Jack frowned. Stephanie waited for a smart reply. Jack just looked like a fish out of water trying to formulate something good to retort. Stephanie huffed a humorless laugh at his obviously failing effort to come back with a retort of some kind.

"Yep. That's what I thought." She turned away from Jack to pace and think. Jack growled back in a foul mood.



A couple of hours later Jack and Stephanie discovered how everyone was fed in this section of the compound. Three sixty-foot long counter tops emerged from the walls presenting lunch. Long lines immediately began to form as everyone scrambled for first dibs. Pushing and shoving began as well. You can imagine it would in such a large crowd of people.

Jack, pulling Stephanie along behind him, moved to get in line. As they squeezed in line, Jack got pushed into the wall as a line bully shoved someone else into them.

"Hey!" He exclaimed at the same time someone else behind him exclaimed, "Ow!" Jack turned to Stephanie assuming it was her and apologized. She shrugged.

"It wasn't me." She said. Jack's eyebrows furrowed in confusion then surprise as a tiny red head emerged from the wall that he had been shoved into. She was perfectly pale, no freckles at all on her face, her hair was curling in a kinky sort of way, and she had startling green eyes. She was so short that Jack was sure that she couldn't be even five feet tall.

"It was me that said 'ow'." She scowled up at him clutching her middle.

"I'm really sorry." Jack apologized. "I was shoved, and I literally didn't see you there."

"Of course." The red-headed pipsqueak scoffed. "You weren't supposed to." She smirked. "And, you're forgiven by the way." She said looking around him.

"How'd you do that?" Stephanie asked her quietly as they moved forward. "How'd you blend into the wall like that?"

"I merged *with* the wall. People around here get cuh-ray-zy when the food comes. You would think it was our last meal or something." She rolled her eyes. "It's not like it is really amazing food or anything." She snorted. "My name's Gale Bailey by the way." She smiled up at Stephanie. Stephanie liked her instantly.

"My name is Stephanie Nelson." She barely finished speaking before Gale burst forth a mile a minute.

"If I didn't merge with the wall, I'd be forced to merge with the floor if you know what I mean." Gale nudged Stephanie in the side as she shuddered indignantly at the idea. Jack and Stephanie rose their eyebrows at each other in bewilderment and amusement. She sure could talk... "Anyways!" Gale shook herself as if she was shrugging off the bad imagery of herself as part of the floor. "I hope there's chicken strips today." She smacked her lips. Stephanie giggled clearing her throat to disguise it when Gale looked at her. Gale laughed. "It's ok. I know I'm weird, and that I talk a lot. That's kinda why I haven't made too many friends in here, yet. They can't really keep up with me." She giggled a bit half-heartedly.

"No!" Stephanie jumped in quickly. "We like you. You might be hard to follow somewhat, but you keep us on our toes. It's fun!" She smiled genuinely at Gale. "Plus, you're the first friendly face we've found today."

"Oh! That's because everyone's too busy fighting to win the 'competition'. Ha! They're all so naïve." Gale snorted as she grabbed a tray and plate. She began piling her plate with food. Stephanie followed suit. Jack had already sped through the line, and now he was finding them

places to sit at the cafeteria style tables that showed up while the lines formed. Once all three were seated, Stephanie resumed the conversation.

“Competition?” She asked.

“Yeah.” Gale answered between bites. “Some of these weird-o’s have it in their heads – they’re the ones that are openly showing off their powers, just so you know – that we’re being watched, and that a ‘special’ select few will be chosen for some ‘special’ task.” Gale chuckled. Jack and Stephanie exchanged glances. “It’s kind of ironic really since tech-nic-al-ly,” Gale drew out the word for effect. “we’re all special. We all have *special* abilities. So, if we we’re to call it like it really was, these people watching are looking for *specific* not *special* abilities.” Gale stressed the difference. Jack looked around to see that everyone was minding their own business.

“Gale,” Jack began. “I need to know. Do you trust the system?”

“Not at all.” She answered cheerily even though a burning hatred glowed from her eyes. “Why would I trust the people who lied and stole me from my real family?” She asked so quietly that Stephanie and Jack had to lean in to hear her. Gale went to work packing away an amount of food that belied her small frame.

Stephanie and Jack searched each other’s eyes exchanging looks before nodding in agreement. They had found their ally.

“You guys had better eat up. The food goes with the tables when the time’s up. It’s a big no-no to keep a plate for later. I’ve tried.” Gale admitted sulkily. A glint appeared in Jack’s eyes just as he and Stephanie dug into their own plates with new fervor.

CHAPTER TEN

TRUE TO the mechanic's word, the bus was up and running by morning. John was ready and waiting. He ascended the steps, paid his fare, and took a seat to enjoy his meager breakfast. Once his appetite was satisfied he stretched out as much as was possible for his tall frame to wait out the ride.

Having skipped his research the night before, John pulled his Bible from his duffel now. Not one to waste time or opportunities, John wanted to make good use of the long ride to the other side of town. Sharing the same name as the book of John caused him to return to that book often. He had heard once that his answers could be found there. For as many times as he had read the book, John was surprised that he hadn't found them yet.

John felt the answers he was searching for were important enough to be thorough, so he looked again. Opening his Bible to the book of John, he began to read from chapter one for the sixth time.

The bus ride was fairly smooth and quiet offering minimal distractions. The driver did not make too many stops for people, so they made it to their destination in pretty good time. John closed his Bible with a sigh. He still had not found his answers, but he felt close. What could he be missing? John was sure it was staring him in the face, and he just could not see it for an unknown reason.

John stuck his Bible back into its spot in his duffel and left the bus in search of a taxi to take him the rest of the way to Dr. Yassiff's laboratory. It was no trouble to hail a taxi, and John was on his way within minutes. The driver was reckless, so they flew through traffic without being stopped by very many stoplights.

When John arrived at the lab, he paid his taxi driver and took a good look at the building. John looked at his address then back up at the building. This was not what he had been expecting. The doctor's former laboratory did not look like what John thought a laboratory should look like.

The laboratory looked like a house. In fact, it was a house. An old house, but it was a house nonetheless. The laboratory appeared to be a two-story brick home built around the early 1900's. *Interesting.*

John made his way toward the steps but changed course and headed around back instead. In his eagerness to keep moving he had almost forgotten his number one rule when entering somewhere he had never been before: Always, always know your environment. Get to know the building and its surroundings.

As John made his way down the side ally, he thought he heard some scuffling coming from behind the building. Moving with caution and as silent as a cat, John slid to the corner of the building and peered around it. He nearly laughed outright at what he saw.

A girl had stacked all she could behind the building trying to reach the one open window on the back of the building. John would have stood and watched if it did not look like she would break her neck. Thinking a moment he studied her judging what her reaction might be to his presence. Should he startle her from around the corner or closer to the girl's tower of certain pain and/or death? John decided the best move would be to make some noise closer to her.

Trying to be somewhat casual about it, John stepped from around the corner. The girl had not noticed him yet. She was too busy trying to reach the open window and place her foot higher on the wall. John cleared his throat as he walked closer to her dragging his heel a little so as to alert her to someone else's presence.

The girl atop the teetering tower of death paused and looked around. Bingo. The girl was very pretty – just like he thought she'd be. She was clearly American with a European heritage about her tanned complexion. John was almost under her now. As soon as her eyes found his face, she had the "I've been caught red-handed" look. Disappointment and worry crossed paths over her face fighting for dominance.

Dårlig pike – Poor girl. John decided to put her out of her misery. Putting his hands up palms out, John approached her wavering structure of junk.

"Hei, kjære, You're not in trouble, but can I help you down? There's a safer entrance." John gestured over his shoulder implying the front door.

"I don't have a key." She answered haltingly. John smiled friendly-like.

"I have one that should get us in. I'm John. Can I help you down now?"

The *pike* hesitated. She seemed unsure if John was going to really help her. John was worried she might actually take her chances and keep trying to enter through the window.

"I promise that I'm not going to hurt you." John coaxed. Her eyes narrowed. "The fact that you hesitate to accept my help tells me that you've had some rough experiences with some not-so-trustworthy people?" He offered. She nodded, and her eyes narrowed even more. "What's your name?" John had guessed, but he figured that asking would spook her less.

"Kellie." She answered quietly. John almost did not hear her.

"Nice to meet you, Kellie." John smiled up at her. Kellie's tower trembled beneath her, and she gripped the wall tightly. Her eyes were wide with fear. John was tense now. She really needed to come down. "The odds don't seem very great, I know. Either you stay up there and risk getting hurt or falling to your death, or you can come down and meet a stranger who truly wants to help. *Vær så snill*, come down." He pleaded. "I promise I won't assist you if I don't have to, but I really don't want to see you get hurt." A moment of desperation shone through her eyes as she weighed her options for herself. Kellie thought for one more moment but began to move when the tower began to tremble again.

"Alright! I'm coming down." Gingerly she placed her feet and kept a firm grip on anything she could on the way down. Immediately when she hit bottom Kellie distanced herself from John. John

released an audible sigh of relief. Kellie eyed him curiously while trying to steady her own breathing. "You kept your word...?"

"*Selvfølgelig*, I did." John said indignantly. Kellie snorted.

"Well, I need to test you one more time before you have my trust. If you knew the last couple of days I've had, you would understand." John thought to himself that he probably would. "Alright. You said that you had a key?" She waited. John nodded. "Ok, you go open the door and wait for me. I'll come to the door when I'm sure there's no trap."

"Ok. I'll be waiting." John smiled and turned to leave.

"I'll know if there's a trap." Kellie warned.

"There won't be one." John assured even as he laughed inside. She really couldn't pull off intimidating. Then he sobered. *Dårlig pike*, thinking everything was a trap... What had been going on the last couple of days? John made his way to the front of the house to pick the lock on the front door. He had found a skeleton key for a great bargain a few years ago. Nearly the most useful purchase he had ever made.

By the time Kellie had decided to come around the house, John was not sure she was coming and had been thinking about going to look for her. He had thought better of it since Kellie most likely was coming here for answers not just a safe haven. Especially after all she had been through, she would want to find out something to give her insight as to why these guys were after her.

Kellie looked both ways before coming out of the alley. She then kept her eyes peeled as she climbed the stairs. When she reached the top, she kept a few paces between her and John. John ushered her into the building. Kellie looked up at him and nodded in thanks, but stepped back insisting that he enter first. John shrugged and went in.

John shut the door behind them and went to work looking for the light switch. Once he had the light on they discovered a hallway full of rooms. There was more to this house than John had thought from the outside. They went about looking for where Kellie's *far* might have worked.

This was not as easy as John originally thought. He had assumed that the house would only have one workspace and a general area for paper filing. John found the administrative office and began looking through filing cabinets for the scientist's names and which room Yassiff might have worked in. Kellie followed suit eyeing John while they worked.

"So, where did you come from?" She spoke up.

"Norway." John answered.

"Norway?" Kellie paused in her search and looked at him askance.

"*Ja*, I sailed over here around two and half weeks ago." "You speak very good English." She complimented.

"*Takk skal du ha*." John smiled, but he kept working without looking up. "I dealt with enough English speaking men back home to feel it was necessary to learn."

"Interesting. But, why are you *here*?" Kellie pressed. "Here at the lab. Why did you try to help me? What are you looking for?" Questions spilled from her lips like water on a waterfall.

John sighed. He should probably just spill the beans now. "I overheard a couple of guys that were after you and followed them over from Norway. Apparently one of them made a mistake since you obviously weren't there. When I got here to New Jersey, I followed them until I discovered your name and what I thought their motives might be. I don't really know what they're up to other than they wanted to kidnap you for someone named Hornfield. I'm not a fan of bullies, so I determined to find you before them. *Så*, here I am." John shrugged. Kellie listened slack-jawed.

"That seems a bit farfetched..." Her face scrunched in thought processing the information. "You essentially heard I was in trouble, a perfect stranger in Norway, and sailed over to rescue me?" Kellie stared back at John skeptically.

John laughed. "That does sound farfetched." A small smile began to stretch over Kellie's face. "Hei, looks like your *far* worked in room 106." Kellie's smile vanished in a flash. Her eyes narrowed, and she took on a defensive stance.

"How do you know who to look for and that he is my father?" Kellie asked suspiciously. "You did say *father*, right?"

"This was something else I had learned. I believe that the two guys that were after you work for someone that has your *far* hidden away somewhere." Kellie gaped at John.

"What?!" She gasped. "My father? They have my dad?"

"*Ja*, I think so." John affirmed.

"Mom and I were told he died in an accident..." Kellie said in disbelief and wonder. "You're telling me my Dad might be alive?" John nodded. "Ha! That's really hard to wrap my brain around after all of these years, but I really want to believe you..." Kellie admitted. John continued to ruffle through papers while Kellie processed the information he laid on her.

"I think we'll get what we're looking for in the office he used to work in." John suggested. Kellie nodded. "Let's go to room 106." John wanted to keep moving. Too much activity would alert someone to them being in here, or maybe someone that worked there would show up and cause problems. To be discovered would be the last thing they both needed.

Room 106 seemed to be Mark's own private office and lab. Now this looked promising! Here was somewhere they could get answers. John went directly to the computer and Kellie went to look around the room for anything she could learn about her father. John quickly found some good stuff about what Mark Yassiff had been working on.

Mark appeared to have been working on a serum of some sort, a mutagen. It looked like the serum affected the cells without changing the appearance of the human. This is just what he picked up from the essay portion of the research files. This must be what the men that had Mark were after. John began to wonder if the mutagen worked, and if maybe the boss was looking for more leverage for faster production.

Kellie continued to look around the room while John tapped away at the computer hacking into Mark's work files through a "backdoor" he learned in prison. Kellie came across her father's inbox/outbox trays on his desk and paused to leaf through the papers. There was an envelope amongst them that looked out of place. It seemed like a personal letter rather than a business memo like the rest. Kellie pulled out the single sheet folded inside. What she read was confusing. Aside from the letterhead and a signature, there were four words enclosed that she could not

wrap her mind around the meaning. She frowned deeply when it dawned on her what the note must mean after she focused on the date her father had received the demand.

“John...” Kellie cleared her throat. “John, I found something.” John looked up at her questioningly after clicking the ‘print’ button on the screen.

“*Hva* – What did you find?”

“This note... A man sent it to my father the day before he disappeared.” She handed it to John. John took it and read the four words aloud.

“Tomorrow. Don’t be late.” John frowned. “He received this the day before he left?”

Kellie nodded solemnly. “Mother and I will never forget that date.”

“*Interessant...* It would seem you’re *far*’s disappearance was prearranged – with your *far*.”

Kellie scowled. “My father would not be involved in anything shady!”

“I’m not suggesting he was. Just because it was arranged doesn’t mean he was entirely willing. There must have been stipulations severe enough to cause your *far* to up and leave in obedience to this demand.” John clarified. Kellie’s stance and face softened as she came to be on the same page as John.

“You think my father was kidnapped, but he, in part, went of his own free will...?”

“*Ja*. I think they needed your *far*’s serum and hung his family over his head for it. *Så*, he went with them to protect you. However, production must be slowing down because they’re now coming after you. They must want you as a visual reminder for your *far* to show what is at stake if he doesn’t concede with their terms.” John mused. Kellie looked aghast. John took a look at the clock and glanced at the printer apprehensively.

Luckily Mark kept decently organized. A look at the office showed that maybe he was really only organized with his emails. This was probably for legal reasons. Too bad he didn’t take this trouble to the police rather than assuming these backstabbers would keep to their word.

“We need to leave.” John said just as the printer finished. “Bring that letter. Between that letter and these emails we should be able to figure out where they’re keeping your *far*. We might even be able to deduce what they’re using the serum for.” Kellie looked relieved, even excited to be getting answers after all these years. John and Kellie left after giving the place a quick once over to be sure their presence was not noticed on Monday when everyone came back into work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STEPHANIE, JACK, and Gale lay quietly on their cots waiting. Stephanie and Jack weren't entirely sure what for, but nonetheless they waited anxiously. Gale lay waiting for the perfect moment. Earlier all three had determined that tonight was their night to escape. They had to get out of there. If they did not, they wouldn't have a chance at getting the help they needed.

Gale discovered long ago that the evening meal was heavily laced to keep the hundreds of captives sedated - under careful watch. Because she refused to be drugged, Gale would keep back a plate from lunch and eat that for supper instead. Gale had explained earlier that when she had kept food back, after the supper tables had folded themselves back into the floor, men flooded the dorms. Her plate was discovered and she was manually sedated.

Since keeping food back at lunch didn't work, Gale would bring her pillowcase to lunch and fill this for later. This plan seemed to work, so Gale came to the conclusion that all the dishes and silverware must be counted.

One man would enter a room, search each cot and then leave. They would keep a small blue "glow stick" at the ready. Gale had thought this was odd until she saw what it was for. Someone else had decided to go hungry rather than to be drugged as well. The person was swiftly jabbed with the "glow stick," and the girl promptly fell limp upon her bunk. As soon as the guard left their room, an outraged Gale jumped from her bed and sped across to the other bunk and checked the other girl's pulse to find that she was merely asleep. The odd device was not a taser that electrocuted people, but that was only a small comfort.

Stephanie was worried the guard in hers and Gale's room had killed the girl sleeping in the bottom of the other bunk across from them. As soon as she heard her breath deeply though, she realized the guard had only ensured that she would not wake up while the guard roughly searched for the plate Jack had kept back at supper.

"Really? Over a plate?" Stephanie mouthed to Gale over the side of her bunk. she did her best not to be noticed by the guard searching the other bunk bed. Gale rolled her eyes up at Stephanie from her bunk underneath in response then refocused on the guard. Silent as a cat in the night, Gale had slunk out of her bed and up behind the guard. She swiftly slid between him and the bunk merging with the ladder. When the guard failed to find the plate in the bottom bunk, he moved on to the top bunk. Just as he touched the girl with the "taser" to search her bunk, Gale's arm struck from the bunk's ladder as suddenly and swiftly as a cobra would. She redirected his hand and tasered the guard with his own taser. Stephanie was impressed.

“Wow. Nice job.” She congratulated as the guard sunk to the ground without a sound. Gale reemerged from the ladder and shrugged.

“Not my first time.” She smirked up at Stephanie. “It gets fun to be able to do something back to the big bullies every once in awhile.”

“Well, anyway, good job.” Jack laughed as he slipped into their room from next door. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?” Each guard was in charge of searching ten rooms Gale had explained earlier.

“Let’s.” Stephanie agreed.

“Yes!” Gale said enthusiastically.

All three gathered at the doorway to their room while Jack switched eye-sights and took a look around. He saw the hallway was clear and thought they could make it all the way out to the main room. Just in case he checked out the main room with his mind and found guards waiting at the entrance of each hallway entrance.

“So, there’s guards waiting at the entrance of the hallways. They are scanning cards as the guards from the rooms come out.” Jack scrunched up his face in concentration as a plan formed. “We need two more guards’ uniforms. Gale?”

Gale nodded with a grin. “My pleasure.” She moved to leave, then was stopped by Jack.

“Take, Stephanie. Stephanie, you change into the suit of the guard that Gale tases next. Gale, you change into the second guy’s uniform. That way there’s three guards coming from three rooms. It will be more inconspicuous that way.” Both girls nodded then moved to leave. Jack stopped them once more. “Oh, and you should probably taser anyone the guard hasn’t already.” He added solemnly.

Gale grimaced up at him. Stephanie exclaimed, “Why?!”

“Sh! Because, we don’t want them trying to come with us, yet.” Stephanie opened her mouth to interrupt. “No.” Jack cut her off. “We’re going to get help remember? If they try to come with us tonight, we –” He gestured to the three of them. “– won’t get out either.”

Stephanie pouted as she followed Gale to the room across the hall. She knew Jack was right. It just seemed wrong to taser them. Well, it seemed wrong to be leaving them too. But, Stephanie knew without the unity that the three of them had; the whole mass of them would not make it out without confusion and possible loss of life. She would not put it past these guards to be the kind of people to shoot then ask questions later. Gale impressed Stephanie once again as she swiftly tasered the guard and the last sleeping victim in the room before they were even noticed.

“Alright, get dressed.” Gale said. “I’ll go get my costume, and we’ll wait for Jack’s signal.” Stephanie nodded in acknowledgement as she moved to “borrow” the unconscious guard’s clothes. Gale peeked into the hallway then was gone. As soon as Stephanie was changed, she peeked out into the hallway for Jack’s signal.

Stephanie only had to wait a minute before Jack gave his signal, and she and Gale joined him in the hallway. All three held their breath as they marched down the hallway out to the guards scanning ID cards. Single file they formed a line, and each flashed their stolen cards to be scanned. Stephanie had been praying all the way down the hallway that God would help them not to give themselves away. She assumed the others had been doing the same.

Jack and Stephanie had discovered that they both were born again believers having had asked Christ to be their Saviour before they were kidnapped and brought to the compound. Soon after lunch and getting to know Gale, Jack and Stephanie were able to help Gale to do the same. She was now completely of like mind and faith: in regards to having asked Jesus to be her Saviour and also wanting to take down the compound and all involved.

God was good again. The cards scanned clear and the three of them were able to pass on. Or maybe not...

“Wait!” Boomed the guard. The man really only sounded loud because all of their nerves were supercharged with adrenaline and fear. Jack, Stephanie, and Gale froze. They slowly turned to face the man with the scanner. “Come back here. Let’s try that again.”

Jack and Stephanie hesitated to move while Gale marched back toward the man. She stopped right in front of him. The man appeared to be listening, and Gale appeared to be talking. After a few tense moments Gale marched back toward them.

“Get moving!” She hissed when she was near enough. “No talk. Just move.” The others snapped to it and began marching hopefully to freedom.

Jack took on the lead using his mind to guide them out just like when he explored the four examination rooms and five hallways. Their ID cards worked also as the pass key needed to leave the main room back into the hallway that Jack and Stephanie had been brought through earlier that day.

Once through, the three of them had to move slower, waiting on Jack to figure out the next turn. He soon became adept at using his new skill and was able to look farther; therefore, he was able to lead the girls through the labyrinth faster and faster. They did well not to be seen though they saw many other guards along the way.

All three had massive amounts of adrenaline coursing through them. Stephanie had to fight her new flight reflex, Gale repeatedly merged into walls each time she heard footsteps, and Jack had to constantly keep his eyes dim and his mind sharply focused on the task at hand.

Jack later informed them that the compound was so much bigger than they could have imagined. He said later that his mind was not strong enough to see the entirety of the compound’s great enormity. This news was discouraging since that meant that there could easily be another great white room full of other inmates as well. This news was not surprising given how long they assumed this operation had been running, almost two decades if not more. Some of their fellow “inmates” were very much older than they were.

Finally, Jack had led them to the final door leading to the outside world. What awaited them on the other side was a sight all three had only dreamed of seeing again up until this moment. Their key cards allowed them outside into the night air along a very long wall of the compound. There was no one in sight. Each took a deep satisfying breath of fresh Fall air. They all just stood there enjoying breathing in the outdoors and soaking up their surroundings. The trees’ leaves gently shushed in the breeze and the ground just beyond the compound’s tall fence was carpeted in the first leaves to fall of the season. Jack and the girls smiled at each other. The outdoors were better than any of them had remembered.

After a few moments Stephanie heard a low alarm going off through the compound. How? She wasn't sure and at the moment she didn't give it much thought. Opening this door must have triggered the alarm. Their key cards must not have had full clearance, or they missed a hidden camera inside. Either way they were in trouble and would soon be found if they didn't high tail it out of there.

"Guys! We need to run, and run fast! They're going to be coming for us any minute!" Stephanie warned urgently.

"What are you talking about? No one caught us. We're scot-free." Jack scoffed.

"No. I hear an alarm. Don't you? We need to go!" Stephanie exclaimed getting frustrated.

Gale put her ear to the door. "She's right. We really need to go. An alarm is going off." Ferocious sounding dogs could be heard barking at a distance on either side of them. They sounded as if they were getting nearer and nearer by the second. Guards were shouting to the dogs to find the three of them. Stephanie gave an annoyed I-told-you-so look to Jack with wide fearful eyes. He shrugged apologetically.

"Well, let's go then!" He said before taking off at a run. The girls followed close only to be stopped from entering the woods by a tall fencing of barbed wire fencing. Gale seemed to tense up before she pushed herself right through the barbed wire. Stephanie, following Gale's example, tensed in hard concentration and also passed through the barbed wiring unharmed. Both girls rushed on toward the woods without looking back.

"Hey!" cried Jack. "What about me?!" The girls looked back in guilty surprise to find Jack still on the other side of the tall fence worriedly pacing as the dogs and guards' shouting sounded closer and closer. Glancing to the side the dog were nearly on him and the guards only a few paces behind them.... "Guys...?!" Jack called out.

Stephanie ran back to him, and her face screwed in concentration before she grabbed his arm through the fence and yelled at him. "Come!" Jack hesitated only a second before he leaped through the fencing and took charge once again as the three dashed off towards the woods.

Jack tried to use his mind again to lead the way. It would appear that the compound was somewhere in the middle of the woods. Dodging trees in the night was very difficult, especially on the hilly terrain. They did well for a while before chaos hit.

Suddenly with a loud cry all three were surrounded by people on all sides. But, that couldn't be right... The guards couldn't have caught up to them – much less cut in front of them. Could they? Yelling ensued as Jack, Stephanie, and Gale tried to keep track of each other as they were pushed, pulled, and shoved in all directions. Soon not one of them could have said which way was up, down, or any other direction for that matter. There were so many hands and voices it was like trying to swim through a vicious sea of sharks in the rapids.

Jack fought as best as he could, but there were too many of them. By the time he was free of one person two or three more latched onto him. He was discombobulated and frustrated within minutes. It was also so dark by this time that there was no way of knowing just how many attackers there were, let alone where they had come from.

Stephanie tried to fly over the chaos and get away from all the hands, but all those same hands just kept grasping her tightly, keeping her firmly grounded. She was too scared to remember that she could have tried to become intangible and move through the people directly.

Gale had merged into a tree in the attempts to stay out of the way in order to get a handle on the situation. She tried to peer through the darkness to assess what was happening. But because it was so dark, she failed to notice a body being shoved in her direction and the air was knocked out of her in the confusion. She reemerged from the tree and fell to her knees in the leaves.

The whole ordeal had felt like an eternity but settled within minutes. Jack and Stephanie were subdued by the mass and taken away. Gale was on the ground dizzy and unsure of her surroundings. She was just catching her breath when she realized that she was alone in the woods. To top off this “wonderful” discovery, Gale also did not know which direction she, Jack, and Stephanie had come from. She most definitely did not know where the mob had taken Jack and Stephanie.

Gale hit her fist on the ground in frustration. Growling under her breath she attempted to get up. Soon enough she managed to get upright and squinted through the night. How did they come up on them so fast? Who were they? How did Gale and the others not hear them coming? There are so many sticks and leaves on the ground already in the early Fall season that a group of such magnitude should have been announced by any number of twigs breaking and leaves rustling. Gale gained a headache with the strain of squinting through the night and trying to figure out what had occurred back there. Gale tried to focus on the trees and used them as support until she felt she could move faster without them.

Gale thought hard and tried to notice a sign of some sort to show her where the mob had run off to with her friends. It was just too dark. Gale was too stubborn to give up on them and pushed forward. She had to help her friends. Stopping to take a breather and another look around, Gale decided to pray.

“Jesus, I need Your help. I need You to help me find my friends. Please. Amen.” Short, sweet, and to the point. It should work for now. Gale pushed forward, but forgot to open her eyes again after the prayer and rammed right into another tree. Her head bounced off the tree trunk knocking Gale to the ground again. Her head hit the hard ground and that was the last straw for the battered melon. Just as Gale was fading into unconsciousness again she groaned inwardly about how much worse this headache would be when she awoke.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOHN LED Kellie out of the laboratory the same way they had come in. He had to shush her repeatedly since Kellie would babble excitedly about finally having a lead on her father. John could understand the excitement, but having a controlled personality he could not relate with not being able to hold it in. Patience was wearing thin.

Once outside John hailed them a taxi and told the driver to take them to the nearest burger joint. Breakfast had worn off a long time ago on the way to Dr. Yassiff's former workplace, and if John was going to have any patience at all to deal with the babbling female, he was going to need food in his stomach. Pretty or no, this *pike* was going to take some getting used to. Working alone did not really allow for many opportunities to deal with anyone longer than a few hours. John took a calming breath and concentrated on trying to follow Kellie's constant chatting.

"Do you *really* think we'll find him?" Kellie asked worriedly as her excitement began to fade. "Do you think he's alright?" She asked, her doubts setting in despite the hope they had just found back at the lab.

"*Ja*, and *Ja*." John answered shortly.

"How do you know?" She asked wide-eyed seeking reassurance.

"*Fordi*, the people who did this wouldn't torture him until they have used up all other methods of persuasion. They will want your *far* in the best of health and mindset in order to fulfill their wishes with minimal hiccups." John glanced at Kellie when he heard her gasp. The look of horror on her face told him that he had said something wrong.

"Torture...? They would torture my father?" Kellie was horrified. "What kind of monsters are these people?" John groaned. *Jepp*, he had said something very wrong. Now, Kellie would worry they were not moving fast enough to save her *far* from the fate of torture. This was perfect. Well, he never claimed to be the reassuring type. John inhaled a calming breath, calling on his remaining patience to survive the drive to the fast food place.

"How close are we to that burger joint, driver?" John called up front ignoring Kellie's worrisome musings.

"Only a few minutes more." The driver assured John. John sunk into his seat to endure the remainder of the ride.

“John, will we save him before they get nasty?” Kellie repeated a third time. John decided he had better reassure her somehow, or he would be forced to listen to a broken record of worried questions.

“*Ja*, Kellie, we will save your *far* from further heartaches and pain of any kind. I am here to help you, and finding things or people is what I do. Ok?” John looked her in the eye for added reassurance almost as a promise. Kellie seemed to take his words as a promise that her father would be alright until they got there to rescue him. She sighed in relief and settled back into her seat for the remainder of the ride. John breathed his own sigh of relief. Now, it looked like he would have some peace until he could sink his teeth into his burger.

The taxi driver dropped them off at a Burger King, collected John’s money for the fare, and drove off without a second glance. John did not waste any time entering the building. He took long strides up to the cashier to make his order. John ordered three triple whopper burgers, two large fries, and a large drink. After ordering he turned to a repulsed Kellie for her order.

“*Three* triple whoppers...?” She gasped then swallowed as if she had vomited in her mouth. John shrugged then ushered Kellie to the cashier. With effort Kellie cleared her face and ordered a Whopper Jr. combo for herself. She thanked John as she passed him to fill her cup. John grunted in reply and paid for their food. After filling his drink and grabbing their food when it was ready, John led Kellie to a corner booth away from most of the lunchtime customers.

John tossed his duffel into his side of the booth before sitting down to dig into his food. Kellie sat, opened her burger, and bent her head in silent prayer. John paused in his chewing and waited for her to look up.

Kellie caught John’s look when her head came up. She paused momentarily in surprise before she lifted her burger to her lips. She savored a bite before speaking. It had been a long time before she had eaten as well.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Kellie asked at last before taking another bite.

“What were you doing?” John asked.

“Praying.” She answered simply.

“To who?”

“To God of course.” Kellie said cheerily as the more food she consumed the better she felt. John quirked an eyebrow in surprise.

“To God?”

“Mm-hm.”

“And He hears you?” John inquired a little doubtful.

“Yes.” Kellie looked at John questioningly now. “Do you not know Him?”

“Vel, nei.” John shook his head negative with a frown.

“Ah.” Kellie said sadly. “What do you want to know? I will answer best I can. I won’t have all the answers.” She warned. John’s forehead cleared of confused wrinkles for the time being as he saw hope in finding some answers.

“How do you talk to Him?”

“Just like I’m talking to you, albeit more reverently of course.”

“How do you know if He hears you?”

“Because, He promised us that He would hear His children in His Word.”

“His Word?”

“The Bible.”

John smiled. “I have a Bible.”

“That’s great!” Kellie beamed. “So, where have you gone to church that they don’t teach about prayer?” Kellie asked.

John frowned again. “I’ve gone to lots of different kinds of churches. I travel a lot, so I usually drop by whatever cathedral or other religious building there is close by.”

Kellie frowned at this. “Hm. While we’re traveling together, I should help you find good churches we can go to together on Sundays.” She nodded as if that was settled then went right into the other matter. “Hey, was there ever a time in your life that you asked Jesus Christ to save you and take you to Heaven when you die?”

“Nei. I haven’t done that.” John stated frankly, confusion written plainly on his face.

Kellie looked concerned immediately. “Oh! Well, that’s the most important decision a person can make in life – especially since it deals with eternity.” She said enthusiastically with a gentle smile.

“Hm.” John simply grunted. “What would Jesus Christ—?” He paused for confirmation. Kellie nodded. “—be saving me from?”

“He would be saving you from sin’s penalty of going to Hell when you die.”

“Why?” John asked. Kellie paused at this, unsure of how to proceed.

“Why?” She repeated.

“Ja. Why would Jesus save me from Hell? Why would sin’s penalty apply to me?”

Kellie nodded thinking carefully. “For the first question, Jesus loves you. That’s why He would save you from Hell. As for the second, everyone has done wrong or sinned in their life. Whether they have done a little wrong or a lot of wrong, we all deserve the penalty of going to Hell because of it. Heaven is a perfect place made for our perfect God. We cannot enter perfect Heaven with sin on our slates, so Jesus paid the penalty for us by dying on the cross for the whole world. ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him shall have eternal life.’ – John 3:16” Recognition shown on John’s face when he heard that verse from the book of John since he had read it so many times. Kellie continued. “Because, Jesus is perfect and

also rose from the dead three days later, Jesus' sacrifice paid the penalty of sin in full and has made it possible for all people to go to Heaven when they die. All we have to do is admit that we sin, believe Jesus paid the penalty for us, and accept His free gift of eternal life by asking Jesus to be our Saviour and take us to heaven when we die." Kellie beamed. "It's that easy!"

John sighed and processed all Kellie had just said while he ate his first two burgers. "Why did Jesus die for us?" Kellie started in surprise. "You said because He loves us. Why?"

"He loves us because He made us."

John frowned and bit into his third burger with this new information.

"*Vi Vill*, that all makes sense." John mulled over all she had said. "I'm going to need more time to think about all this..." He told Kellie honestly. "*Takk skal du ha* for telling me this, though." John nodded his thanks. It was nice to have a traveling buddy that seemed like she would be able to help him find his answers.

Finally! In his heart he knew all Kellie had told him was true. Kellie really believed all she talked about and obviously had experienced it. There was a brightness inside that came out as she spoke of this Saviour of hers. John wanted to experience this too. His mind hadn't come to terms with the new information just yet, though. John did not feel comfortable making what Kellie claimed to be the most important decision of his life with a cloudy mind.

"We should start sifting through all these emails and see what clues to your *far's* whereabouts we can uncover." John decided. That's right. A new focus, John thought. Focusing on something not related to the other issue would help clear his mind enough to think clearly about it later.

"Oh! Yes." Kellie sprung upright and cleared her trash away. She seemed to sense John's need of a topic change. Maybe she was not as unobservant as he originally thought on the ride over from the laboratory. John sighed appreciatively as he also cleared his trash and refilled their drinks to begin working on the problem at hand. Kellie was pretty *and* smart. John was glad he had decided to get involved. He was right. He was getting rewarded after all with a pretty *pike* and answers to his questions for postponing his vacation for the damsel in distress.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GALE FINALLY awoke from her slumber. Looking around all she saw was red. *Wow*, she thought squinting, *that head-beating really took a toll on my eyes*. Suddenly she realized that she did not have a headache like she thought she would.

“Weird...” She thought out loud. “Shouldn’t I be in the woods somewhere with a migraine?” Gale worried her lower lip between her teeth as she looked around the room that she found herself in.

The ceiling, the walls, the floor, and the bed she rested on – all of it was red. Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked around a little more. The sheets she lay on were red, and more red draped from each of the four posters. The hanging sheets swayed in a gentle draft coming from somewhere else in the room. Every trinket and piece of furniture was red. There was a definite theme going on in there. Even the lighting seemed to be red. Where and what it was, she wasn’t sure since she was unable to locate its origin.

Gale threw her arms out above her head and stretched every muscle from her fingertips to her toes. With a big sigh of satisfaction, she rose from the bed ready to explore. Gale peered at the walls looking for where the draft was coming from. Not seeing anything at a glance she decided to feel the walls looking for openings. Nothing. Maybe there was a sunroof? Looking up she only saw the vague red glow that lit the room. Having walked the room a few times now, Gale began to get frustrated.

With a huff she glared around the room once more. Odd. Gale’s eyes widened in surprise when she saw a ladder leaning against the wall. That definitely wasn’t there when she had been looking around. When had that gotten there? Eyeing it she walked toward it. Why was it in here? There weren’t any tall bookshelves or anything else that made sense for it to be there. Gale grabbed the rung near her shoulders and began to ascend the ladder.

Well at least she was able to see where the light was coming from now. It appeared to be a light fixture without light bulbs. The fixture just glowed. Gale stared. How did that work? How weirdly awesome! Peeling her eyes away from the odd phenomenon Gale looked away only to find another odd phenomenon – a door. The door was directly above her head. Not a trap door but an honest to goodness door hung in a doorframe in the ceiling of the red room. It was of course red. Gale stared. Then she rolled her eyes. It would not be possible to get through this door. It was after

all full-size and she was petite. From where she stood on the ladder against the wall, Gale would not be able to reach the knob with her short arms.

Nearly on the verge of pouting in frustration, her stomach reminded her about her pressing need for food by growling in no uncertain terms. Hugging her middle, Gale glared at the door above her. Then her jaw dropped. If she did not know better, Gale would swear she saw the door shrink. At least it was smaller now, and she could reach the knob. Reaching out she did so. Grasping it Gale twisted the knob pulling the door toward her. It wouldn't budge. She sighed. Now what? It was not going to stay open if she pushed it up. Gravity would, of course, pull it shut again. Gale's stomach growled again.

"Ok! I'll try it anyway. God, please hold it open. I now need out of this room for *two* really good reasons." Gale pleaded with her Heavenly Father. Beginning to get fidgety, Gale held her breath as she twisted the knob one more time shoving the door up as far as she could. This was not far, of course. Thankfully God answered her prayer, and the door stayed open. Gale raised herself up on the ladder as far as she could and grabbed the side of the door frame. She poked her head through the door frame and pushed the door further open. Her eyes widened in wonder as she appeared to be looking at the floor.

Gale looked up and seemed to be looking down a hallway that veered off to the right. She saw a glaringly orange hallway. Three blue-green doors stood at attention on the left. No doors interrupted the hunter-orange wall on the right. Purple hardwood floors led the way down the hallway. Who decorated this place? Someone who either *really* liked Willy Wonka's chocolate factory design, or someone seeking to achieve an Alice and Wonderland theme. Grabbing the side of the door frame again, Gale hoisted herself into the hallway. With a thud she fell onto the floor as the room righted itself. She took a deep breath. That was weird. Righting herself Gale brushed off and looked back through the doorway and groaned. Even though she was looking straight ahead, she gazed *down* into the red room.

"This place is way too funky for my brain to process!" Gale exclaimed. Squinting, she pushed the door shut and rubbed her temples to ward off a headache. Gale turned away from the red room and sighed in relief as she gazed upon a single open doorway at the end of the hallway. Beyond it a sink could be seen. "One problem down. One to go." Gale grinned as she hurried to the room to relieve herself.

When she finished, Gale turned to shut the door behind her in preparation to find the kitchen. It shut with a soft "click" without her even touching it. Gale blinked and moved away not willing to spend time trying to figure out how that very not normal phenomenon occurred. Gale took a step to turn around the corner of the hallway and shrieked as she fell rapidly toward a hole of light. Just as she passed through the circle of light, she gasped and bounced on what felt like a trampoline placed to catch her fall to her feet. Propelled by the momentum of falling and bouncing, Gale fell to her knees – then her face.

Gale moaned. “What *is* this place?” Gale rolled over onto her back, so that she looked up at a large group of green plus signs, minus signs, and dots of varying sizes swirling around what should be a ceiling. Gale attempted to stand up only to find that she already was in this peculiar room. The hole that she fell through in the orange hallway was now in the floor of this room. Gale looked around to gather in her surroundings. What actually was the ceiling in the room was a glowing crystalline domed surface. Closing her eyes Gale inhaled deeply before looking around at the rest of the walls. Just as the first room had been completely red, this room was just as overcome by green. Portraits hung on another wall – all were painted in various shades of green. The third wall was covered in a wall paper depicting all of the green foods that existed. The last wall was a very long green tunnel. Gale grinned. Finally, there was an easy escape from a room. Gale walked right into a life-size realistic painting.

“Ugh!” Gale groaned as she grabbed her head. Her headache was coming back in earnest now. She was so tired of trying to understand how this place worked and bonking her noggin. She was so hungry. Surely, there was a way out... Surely there was a kitchen... Right? Gale turned in a circle. No ladder.

An empty giant picture frame seemed to have been left on the floor at the other end of the room. Odd. Gale laughed to herself. This whole place, wherever she was, has been so very odd. As she drew near Gale realized the picture frame was merely painted. Inside the fake frame Gale saw that a kitchen had been painted there! Or maybe it wasn’t painted after all! Gale tried to step into the painting. Her foot “thunked” on hollow sounding boards. Looking close, she found a trap door handle. She pulled on it and was dismayed to find a black hole and no kitchen. Gale’s stomach growled loudly at her. Did she risk it? Her stomach growled again making her decision for her. Taking a big brave breath, Gale stepped into the hole – and fell *up*.



After falling for what felt like days, Gale was finally dumped on the floor of what appeared to be a commercial kitchen. She picked herself up and brushed off again with a sigh. She was getting a little tired of being dumped into rooms. Looking around with interest, she noticed something in common with all of the crazy rooms that she had been in so far. No one was in them. Since being here Gale has not seen one solitary soul!

Who lived here? How did this place run? Why was it so weird? Gale’s stomach growled angrily again. Nearly doubling over in discomfort, Gale put aside her curiosity and brought her focus back to the need at hand. Food. Where was the food? Gale hurried from one appliance to the next in search for the fridge knowing that would, more than likely, be the source of ready-made food. Finally and at last! She found it.

Gale swung the door outward nearly slamming it against the stainless steel cabinets behind it. Frantically, her gaze searched for something she could eat. Spying some whole carrots she did not bother with washing them and took a large bite of one. Immediately she began searching for the

next thing she could devour. She found a piece of cake and ate it with her fingers. She had decided that it took too much effort to find the silverware. Who needed it anyway? Then she found a sandwich that had been saved for later. She made quick work of that. Finally satisfied enough to find something to drink, Gale closed the refrigerator to go find a cup.

Gale had never seen such a large kitchen in her life! She couldn't even remember seeing something like this in TV. Not nearly in the frantic state she had been when looking for food, Gale took her time to walk around and to gawk at all of the big shiny appliances all around her. Who really needed four ovens? The counter in front of her had to be at least 20 feet long! Pots and pans of every size and shape hung from hooks above the counters. Large metal drawers suggested cooking utensils were hidden inside. Four very full knife blocks were evenly spaced on the counter. While she was not paying attention, Gale bumped into a man's chest when she was rounding a corner in the vast kitchen.

"Oomph!" Gale back pedaled quickly looking up and up and up. This was a very large man of at least 6'7" to Gale's very short 4'10". Gale's mouth hung open in surprise and awe of this huge man of extraordinary looks. The tall man stared down at Gale from his hulking height. The man had a dark complexion with black hair cropped so short it seemed he was having trouble deciding if he should be bald or not. His eyes held a permanent scowl about them, but curiosity and amusement winked at Gale from their black depths. His bulking muscles strained beneath his black t-shirt as he crossed his thick arms. "I'm sorry..." she whispered. The man's dark, thick eyebrows drew together in concern, but his eyes laughed down at her.

"You're alright." He said in a voice so deep it sounded as if it rumbled all the way up from his toes. His voice had a sort of rasp that spoke of disuse. Gale's knees trembled a little at the amount of authority that radiated from him.

"Who are you?" Gale choked barely above a whisper.

He smiled a small kind smile that seemed somewhat unnatural for him. "Drake Garrison." He said simply, and the smile vanished as his mouth could not hold that form any longer.

"Dr-ake?" Gale pronounced. He nodded affirmative. Gale snapped out of her surprised stupor. "Where did you come from?" She demanded squinting up at him with her hands fisted on her hips.

"That way." He motioned behind him with a backward motion of his head.

Gale narrowed her eyes up at him. *Thanks, Mr. Obvious.* She thought to herself. A corner of Drake's mouth twitched as if he had heard her thoughts, but his frown remained in place. "Really. Where did you come from?"

Drake heaved a sigh through his nostrils. "I came from my quarters."

Gale stared. "Where's that?" Drake stared back. Gale blinked. "Well?"

"You're thirsty."

Gale started at the change in subject. "What?"

"You're thirsty." He repeated.

Gale frowned. "How do you know this?"

Drake shrugged noncommittally as he turned to some cupboards on his left, extracted a cup - a large one, then filled it with water from a sink on his right that Gale had missed. Drake handed her the glass. Gale took it in both of her small hands feeling much like a child. But really, how could she not? Could the cup be any bigger? Gale gaped up at the large man then back at the cup. It makes sense. She shrugged. After she thirstily gulped down about a quarter of the glass unable to hold anymore water without floating away, she glanced up to see the goofiest grin on the biggest man she'd ever met. It was hilarious.

"What?" She asked with a giggle. Immediately the stoic giant was back.

"Nothing." Drake replied. Although his face gave away nothing his eyes were barking in laughter. Gale's eyes began to narrow. Before she could insist he tell her what was so funny, Drake spoke. "I think that we should talk."

Gale's face screwed up in confusion. "What about?"

"First, come with me. Then, we will talk." Drake turned to go back the way he had gestured to.

Gale halted. "Wait a minute! We're going to your room to talk?"

Drake hesitated in thought. Then his eyes lightened with understanding. "We're going outside."

"Through your bedroom?" Gale asked incredulous.

"No. it only seems like we are going through my room. But we won't." Drake sighed.

"I see." Gale nodded. "How do we get outside?"

"Through this doorway."

"That simple?"

"Yes...?" Drake drawled.

Gale bristled at his tone, and she began to mumble insults to his back under her breath. Nothing about this place had been simple. There's no way that leaving could be that simple.

"I can hear you," He rumbled with mirth, "and it can."

Gale's bristling turned to anger, so that she was unaware of anything but wanting to fry this giant. He was so frustrating! This place was so frustrating, and he made her feel like she obtuse or something. Gale's ears smoked and fire unfurled from her hair. Sparks sizzled all around her. She didn't hear them snapping all around her.

Drake froze. Slowly he turned to face her. The look on his face sobered her immediately; anger turned to curiosity in an instant. Just as fast her moment of uncontrol was subdued, and she was still unaware of what had just occurred. Drake's brow furrowed deep over his eyes making them dark and a little bit intimidating.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She wondered.

"You were fire."

"I was *what*?" Gale gaped up at him incredulous. "I was *what*?" She repeated.

"You were fire." He repeated with fascination this time.

"I know what you said. I want you to elaborate. Obviously I wasn't fire *exactly*. What did I look like?"

"Smoke came from your ears - not dark but white. Fire enveloped your body, but it was a pale pink with orange flames. Your hair floated around you with its energy like there was a breeze in the air. Bright sparks flew, crackled and snapped all around you." Drake explained quietly.

"Wow!" Gale breathed. "No way! That's awesome! Did I really look like that?" Gale asked way too excitedly. "Really?" She asked skeptically with her arms crossed as she leaned back to stare up at the giant. This guy was too much.

Drake full on glared and took a step toward her. He leaned down to stare her in the eyes as he spoke. Gale took a step back. "I never lie." He growled in anger. "If you wish to believe other than I tell you, that is your choice. But, my Spark-Full-of-Passion, don't – don't ever call me a liar." That last command was spoken right in Gale's face. She swallowed.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

He nodded his thanks. "You're forgiven." With that he withdrew and turned on his heel to march through the waiting door behind him. Apparently he expected Gale to follow because he did not check to see if she did, or if she kept up with his monstrously long strides.

Gale whispered a prayer of thanks that the giant didn't eat her for angering him. "It was just a rhetorical question..." She pouted. Getting over it, she asked again. "Did that really happen the way you described?"

Drake, grinning out of her line of sight, answered shortly, "Yes."

"Well, that's a new one. Hmmm... I haven't had that happen yet." Gale lapsed into thought for a moment. "I can meld into any shape, and now I can turn on fire. Fun." She smiled. "Stephanie and Jack'll get a kick out of this." She giggled. "Not only do I look like the aftermath of a hurricane every morning, but now I look like the survivor of a wild fire. Perfect." She sighed.

Drake continued to smile and listen while he swallowed chuckle after chuckle as she talked about herself. Gale would throw in a question for him here and there, but she would rarely give time to

answer. The girl's talk was flowing so nicely that Drake would bet that she had no idea she was babbling her fear away. Drake chuckled heartily in his mind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JOHN AND KELLIE poured over Mark Yassiff's emails looking for any clues as to where Mark might be kept. They were not able to deduce who was behind it. The man Mark emailed was very careful to be anonymous. Each digital signature was a mess and could not be deciphered. The translation was not listed below the sloppy group of swirls either.

John determined that the man was an investor, interested in investing in Mark's discovery and further research in the product. Money was sent to Mark's account specifically, but he did not share his wealth with Mark's colleagues. "Money Bags" seemed solely interested in Mark's research and made this pretty clear in his correspondence and where his funds were sent.

Mark and the investor exchanged many emails. The majority of which included the fund transfer receipts and progress reports. Once Kellie and John were able to separate all of those and set them aside, Kellie found a small, interesting stack that hinted at something more along the lines of what they were searching for.

"Hey! Look at this!" Kellie said excitedly. John looked up from the page he was scouring.

"Hva?"

"I think I found something juicy about the investor-man."

"Vi vil, what is it?" John urged.

"It would seem that he lives in the United States but has an off-shore lab."

"Hu h." John absorbed this information. "Where's the off-shore lab? There's a better chance your *far's* being kept there." John decided. Kellie scanned the email once more.

"This one doesn't say. It only mentions his owning the lab..." Kellie trailed.

"Vi vil, try to find a location for that lab. I really feel like that's our best bet. 'Money Bags' isn't going to want conflict and mayhem linked to his home base. He surely has many other operations, and he wouldn't want this business causing problems for the others. He'd want a clean *syndebukk* in case he ever needed to cut ties."

Kellie giggled at John's nickname for the investor, but she wrinkled her nose in distaste of the man since she believed John's assumptions to be accurate. Both went back to scouring the emails for information. When they had gone through their stack once, they switched halves and leafed through them again setting aside promising ones with the one Kellie had already found.

John grabbed the stack and began jotting down all the useful information they decided could be helpful on the back of discarded sheets of paper. Kellie gathered up all the emails and stacked them nicely in front of her. Hope shone in her eyes as Kellie watched John work. John caught her look and smiled kindly at her before continuing to jot notes.

“Ok!” John arched his back in his seat with a sigh. Kellie stared back eagerly awaiting what he was about to say. “You were right about the off-shore lab, and I think that I can locate it with a map based off these emails.” Kellie beamed. “I think Money Bags was warming your *far* up for living there seeing as he described the island often. He glossed over the fact that Mark would be coming alone and never leaving, *selvfølgelig*... But, based on the investor’s descriptions I think that I can figure out which is Money Bags’ island.”

“That’s great!” Kellie beamed. “That’s progress my mother and I never had all of these years. Finally!” Kellie breathed sighing and closing her eyes her face tilted back as if a great weight had been relieved.

“Hei, don’t be celebrating yet.” John warned with quirked lips. “This is only a clue, remember.”

“Don’t burst my bubble just yet, John.” Kellie smirked sadly. “After years and years of nothing and now finally we’ve found something, I think I have the right to celebrate a little.” Kellie’s face fell. “Mother and I were told to believe him dead. Now, there is hope that he is alive. Don’t take that away just yet. Let me find out for sure. I already have regrets for giving up.” John nodded solemnly.

“Hope you shall have then! Let’s go find a map and that island.” John said cheerily.

Kellie smiled thankfully. “Let’s.” She agreed.

John and Kellie stashed away the stack of emails in John’s duffel and left the Burger King in search of a library for a map. They hailed another taxi, and it took them to the library. Once there John took the lead seeking out the right map that he was looking for. Kellie tagged along and tried to be useful without getting in the way too much. Kellie surprised John with a question while he was comparing his notes with the map he had settled on.

“John... What do you do?”

“Hm?” He hummed absentmindedly.

“What do you do that you seem to have all this money?” Kellie asked conversationally. John looked up at her warily. “I mean, you seem pretty rich to me, pulling out money from all your many pockets not thinking twice.” She winked. “Makes a girl wonder at the type of man she’s decided to go on an adventure with.”

John smirked. “I collect things.” He answered shortly after a while.

“You collect things?” Kellie prodded.

“Ja. I collect things of value and sell them to the highest bidder.” John shrugged as he went back to work on the map.

“They must be very valuable things.” Kellie mused.

"Jepp." John confirmed. "I've been doing this for a while, too, with no real retirement in mind, so the money has accumulated some." John added, hoping that would be the end of it. He should have known better.

"How long?" Kellie asked.

John sighed. "About eleven years."

"Wow, that is a long time." Kellie gaped. "How old are you?" Kellie popped the question on him like a bomb. John started. He squinted up at her thinking she was getting nosy.

"Why do you want to know?"

Kellie blushed. "I'm just curious. Mother's always been telling me to mind my own business." She shrugged apologetically.

"Hmph. She's right. You should listen to her." John grumped and went back to work. Kellie, seeing she had asked too many questions for the present, backed off and began to look at a map to occupy herself. John obviously didn't want to be disturbed. "I'm twenty-eight." John mumbled without looking up. Kellie beamed and bit her lip in pleasure that he had answered her. She kept silent for a time before she spoke.

"I'm twenty-four." She said softly only watching him through her peripheral pretending to be looking at her map still. She saw John's glance of surprise before he went back to the map and did not say anything in response. Kellie smiled. She supposed she like him. *I had better be careful, or John might get annoyed with me.* She warned herself mentally.

For the next hour and a half Kellie let John work in silence and did not bother him again unless he asked for something. Finally, he seemed content with his location, but Kellie could not decipher from his face if he was pleased or annoyed at his discovery. Suspense was killing her.

"Well?" She finally broke down and asked.

"*Vi vil...*" John trailed. "I've figured out which island Money Bags is using as his lab base."

"That's great!" Kellie's eyes shown in excitement. "Where is it? How do we get there?" She asked in rapid fire looking between John and the map.

"By boat, I think, would be best." John mused. He seemed to be holding something back, mulling it over in his mind.

"John, what's bothering you?" Kellie asked point blank.

"That's my island." John pointed to a small rather remote island off the coast of Massachusetts a few miles outside of Cape Cod in the Atlantic Ocean. Kellie peered at it.

"You have an island?" Kellie gaped wonderingly at him.

"*Vi vil, nei.*" John sighed, shaking his head. "I don't own it. I just call it 'mine' because that's where I go to vacation for a month every so many years." Kellie glanced at the map then to John in wonderment. If she thought he had been loaded before, she had a brand new picture of his fortune now. John sighed and frowned down at the island on the map. "I didn't realize it was

infested with parasites.” He grumbled grouchily. Kellie almost laughed at his tone before remembering just how horrible these “parasites” were. Kellie swallowed her laughter before speaking.

“That’s unfortunate.” She said.

John looked at her as if she had said the understatement of the year. “*Tror du?* This job just gets more and more complicated.” He sighed rolling his neck as if a tension headache was forming.

“What do you mean?” Kellie frowned clearly confused.

“I was under the impression when I began that you were the only one in need. Then before I even find you I discover they have abducted your *far* already, *så* he needs saving as well. Now, I find this monster has invaded my territory all along. It’s quite irritating.” He exhaled deeply. “Next, we’ll find out that Money Bags is planning to take over the world!” John spat angrily. He was frustrated and half-expecting his prediction to be true. Kellie stared in wonderment.

“Why, John?” John frowned at her questioningly.

“Why are you helping me, now my father also?” She asked looking him in the eye. Her eyes begged honesty from him. John took a deep breath, thought, then answered.

“I want to.” He began. “I’m liking the feeling I get by helping someone else. The last eleven years have been all about me. I have the resources and this adventure has intrigue. *Jeg antar*, bottom line, why not?”

Kellie searched his face. Seeing the honesty of his words, she smiled. “Thank you, John, for helping us. We really need it; and, I think I can speak for my father on this one, we really appreciate it!” Without a second thought Kellie, with tears filling her eyes, threw herself at John for a bear hug.

“Thank you, God, for sending John to help us!” John heard her mumble against him before she had collected herself and pulled herself away looking rather embarrassed. John furrowed his brow in confusion over this statement, but since he did not know how to put the words together to ask about her statement he let it slide for now.

Kellie shuffled her feet and would not look John in the eye. “I’m sorry. I was just so happy to have a friend helping me again after the kind of weekend I’ve had. Not to mention you’re going above and beyond the kind of help I would have gotten elsewhere. Thank you, John.” Kellie shyly smiled tearfully up at him. John began to feel a little uncomfortable. It wasn’t an entirely unpleasant feeling – he just had not experienced such gratitude very much. Plus, *pika’s* crying never did sit well with men that had a heart. Apparently, he had one. John cleared his throat.

“You’re welcome, Kellie.” John thought a minute. “You know...” Kellie looked up at him again. She looked on in wonder as the tough guy fumbled for what to say for once. “You could help me too..” Kellie’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Me? Help *you?* How?”

John cleared his throat again. “You could answer questions for me.”

“Sure. I’ll try.” She agreed willingly. “What kind of questions?”

“About this book.” John held up his Bible. “And about the God you pray to.”

Kellie smiled warmly. “I’d be glad to.”

A small smile peeked through as John relaxed some upon receiving her answer. “First question, how do I become saved like you?”

Kellie beamed so bright that the sun might as well have lived in her and shown through her pores. “I would be honored to show you how, John.” She said warmly. Kellie gestured for John’s Bible, and when he gave it to her, she showed John from God’s Word how to ask Jesus Christ to be his Saviour.

Afterwards, John had never been so light. Finally, FINALLY! He had his answers. This was truly the One, the only God of the universe. He knew it in his soul. Maybe God did send John to Kellie by sending those two fellows to Norway across his path. God knew Kellie would have the answers to John’s questions, and God knew that John would be able to help Kellie. Seeing things the way Kellie saw them, worked by God, was really cool!

John smiled down at Kellie appreciatively. “Thank you, Kellie.” John filled those words with as much emotion as a macho man could. Kellie beamed tearing up at the privilege she had just had witnessing John coming to know Jesus. There really was no greater privilege.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DRAKE LED Gale through his “bedroom” door to the outdoors. Stepping into the sunlight Gale breathed deep appreciative gulps of fresh air. With a smile she basked in the beauty around her. The trees were all different shades of Fall colors, the sky was clear and very blue, and a light breeze filtered through her already wild hair. The world around her couldn't be more perfect. Looking at her you would think Gale hadn't been outside in months or years even. Drake watched on in amusement. He even looked around for himself and appreciated what he saw.

“So. We need to talk, huh?” Gale broke the silence.

“Yes.” Drake sighed. “I need some questions answered.” He scrutinized her face seemingly for those answers.

“So do I.” Gale stated emphatically.

Drake grunted in surprise. “You do?”

“I do.”

“Such as...?” He prompted.

“How does your house work? Where did you come from? How did I get here? How do I find my friends? We're on a mission of sorts, so I really need to find them.” When Gale took a breath, Drake *hmped* in thought as he processed her questions.

“I make it work. Depends. I brought you. I can help you. What kind of mission?” He answered each question slowly in turn ending with a question of his own.

“How do you make it work? Depends on wh-”

“No.” Drake interrupted. “One topic at a time.” Gale pouted. “I make my house work like this.” Drake motioned to his front door. The door opened with the motion of his hand then closed as he dropped it. Gale gaped. Then her face dropped to a nonchalant expression.

“That's neat. I guess.”

Drake smirked. “As for where I came from, I suppose that depends on which *where* you are referring to first?”

Gale narrowed her eyes in confusion and a bit of annoyance. Drake smirked again.

"I'm originally from Ohio. But, I escaped from the same compound you did." Gale's eyes widened in surprise. "Where else?" Drake asked. "You obviously came from there with your unique fire talents - and others it sounds like." Gale dropped her eyes as her mouth opened to the shape of an "O". Drake chuckled. "I found you knocked out at the bottom of a hill. I can help you find your friends. I can probably help with your 'mission of sorts' too." He crossed his arms. Gale opened her mouth in preparation to ask more questions. "Uh-uh. My turn."

Gale pouted and sat on the ground right where she stood. Drake laughed. He laughed a good hard, double over, real laugh. Gale just stared off at the woods around them in annoyance.

"Alright." He spoke when he had caught his breath. "How old are you?" Gale's glare became more fierce. He held his hands up in surrender, but waited for an answer instead of retracting the question.

Gale sighed when she realized that he would continue to wait. "18."

Drake coughed in surprise. "18?"

"Yes." She growled.

"Ok... How long had you been in the program?"

"Sixteen years." She said quietly.

Drake dropped to his knees on the ground in front of her and gently raised her chin with his first two fingers. He studied her eyes with anger so fierce Gale thought that maybe he had fire abilities too. "Sixteen years?" He breathed. She nodded. "They entered you when you were two?" She nodded again. "Blasted, greedy fools!" Drake fumed. Drake took steadying breaths as he sat on his backside resting his arms on his propped knees and continues to stare at Gale between his legs as he silently fumed.

Gale spoke up uncomfortable in the angry giants presence. She babbled in an effort to make things sound better than they were to douse Drake's fury. "They weren't too hard on me. I never felt like they worked me too hard. I just wanted to play more than work is all..." Gale trailed off mumbling more excuses for the evil men of the compound shyly watching him closely. Drake studied her until she looked away in silence. He sighed.

"You must be a tough cookie then." He smirked

"The toughest." Gale confirmed and smiled ruefully back at him.

"You said that you were with friends. Who are they? How many of you are there?"

"It's just Jack and Stephanie with me."

Drake thought a moment. "I don't remember them."

"They're new. They just showed up a couple of days ago in the Big Room. How long were you in for? Did they let you go, or did you escape?"

Drake looked at her pointedly with a half-smile, and she blushed. "I was in for ten years, and then I escaped. I doubt that they *allow* anyone to leave."

"Oooo!! How?" Gale sat forward eagerly like a child awaiting a story.

"I made the doors or walls move for me." Drake explained not one to tell a lengthy tale.

"Nice!" Gale grinned and nodded appreciatively. Drake chuckled. "So you really think we can find Jack and Stephanie?" Gale furrowed her brow and had scooted closer to Drake. Her knees to his legs were now barely touching. Drake was about to move away, and then he stopped. A puzzled expression entered his eyes as he stared unseeing over Gale's shoulder.

"I do." He answered slowly after some time.

"How?" Gale asked, slowly catching on to the fact that something was up.

"Because... you're telling me where they are."

"What?" Gale plopped back onto her bottom with her eyebrows furrowed not understanding. Drake's face darkened. Whatever he saw – he didn't like it. Gale was confused, and she didn't like being confused. "How can I be telling you where they are if I don't know myself?" She asked doubtfully. Drake's brow furrowed as he got up. He blinked. Looking down at her now, he seemed as confused as she was.

"I don't know." He said simply. "But, you did. Let's go find your friends." He reached a hand out to her. Gale put her hand in his, and he swiftly lifted her up. With that he took off across the hill, and Gale trailed behind with a huff. *When was this guy going to make sense?* She wondered.

"So, where are they?" She asked aloud.

"With the Nordoms." Drake answered. The last word came out heavily as if he did not care for them very much.

"Huh?" Gale squinted in confusion. "Nordoms?"

"Yes." Drake sighed.

Gale frowned then growled in annoyance. Nope. This guy would never make sense, and he probably would never give her straight answers either.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ONCE JOHN and Kellie had settled the matter of where the island was located, John went to work on deciphering exactly what the island's coordinates were. He claimed that he would be able to drive a large motor boat out there with no problem. Kellie just smiled and let him focus. This was John's area of expertise. She didn't even have any idea how to properly utilize a map, unfortunately. This was something that she decided that she wanted John to teach her. The more she watched him efficiently work, the more she wanted to know how to do it too.

Maybe when this was all over John would be willing to teach her some of his seemingly never ending list of talents. Would John still be around after this was all over? This thought hit Kellie like a curve ball to the stomach. She had decided that she liked him already while they were at Burger King. He was definitely a loner typically, she had deduced. *But*, she thought, *I could teach him to like company. I'm sure I could!* She smiled. Besides, every decent man should settle down eventually in his lifetime. Right?

Kellie sat down beside John to watch him work and ask questions periodically. She had completely forgotten about her decision to let him work in peace when she decided to learn what he could teach her.

Kellie did not get very many answers. John mostly ignored her or answered her in grunts. He was not very informative.

"Ok." John finally spoke an intelligible word. "We have coordinates for the island. Now, let's go secure a boat. We can be out there by tomorrow afternoon." He informed her as he stood and began to clean up the clutter that they had gathered for information.

Kellie's eyes widened. "Tomorrow?"

"Mm-Hm." John answered as he rolled up the map to put it away now that he was done with it.

"I thought we would be able to go to the island today? You said this sort of thing was what you did: retrieving things." Panic rose in her throat. The sooner they saved her father the better.

John's eyebrows rose. "*Ja*, it is what I do. *Derfor*, you will follow my lead. We go tomorrow."

"But, why do we have to wait until then?" Kellie nearly whined with her impatience to see her father. "I thought we would save him today since we know where he is."

“Kellie. We have no plan. We need a plan. We also need a boat. By my estimations it will take about four hours to drive that motor boat out to the island.” John waited to see if any of this was getting through to her.

Kellie frowned, “So?”

John sighed. “*Så*... We don’t have enough daylight left to drive out there; and before you ask, *nei*, I am not driving in the dark over the ocean. *Så*, tomorrow it is.” John turned on his heel, slung his duffel on his back and left the research room into the main area of the library. He made short work of securing a computer and finding a boat to rent. John wrote down on a scrap of paper, with the typical pencil stub found in libraries, the name and number of the man boasting of the best vessel to take out on the water.

Kellie sighed in frustration as John went about his business without paying her any mind. John snatched up the scrap of paper and glowered at it as he dialed the number into his cell. His eyes scanned the library while he waited for an answer. Kellie frowned at this. Then she realized that he must be keeping an eye out for anyone tracking her down. Funny, Kellie had nearly forgotten about the fact that there were people out looking for her. In John’s big, burly company it was hard to feel in danger anymore. She slid into the chair next to his cubicle and shrunk down to be sure her thin form was concealed behind her cubicle walls.

John spoke with the boat’s owner as if he had arranged this kind of thing before. He wanted details about the boat that Kellie would never think to ask having no experience with them herself. John told the owner they would be renting the boat for four days then insisted on paying cash. The man seemed eager about this. Kellie could practically hear the man’s enthusiastic response from John’s phone. Then John suggested a lower price and the man’s tone became angry. Impatience darkened John’s face as he negotiated with the man in a deceptively calm tone. Under his breath he spoke angry Norwegian when the owner must have become unyielding. Exhaling a deep breath through his nose, John spoke low and firm through the phone insisting on his final offer, reminding the man that he was paying cash.

Kellie looked on trying to keep tabs on the conversation without giving in to the temptation to put her ear to the other side of John’s phone for better clarity. John negotiated prices with the man for a good eight minutes. Then a broad smile broke his lips as he sealed the deal at last. John pulled the phone from his ear and ended the call before he put it in his pocket. He looked up with a smug grin before turning to log off of the computer.

“So? What happened?” Kellie burst.

“Sh!” John whispered with his eyebrows lowered, but the smug grin stayed in place. “When it was all said and done, the *tosk* agreed to my original price – with a discount.” John sniffed, pleased with himself. “Let’s go find somewhere to stay the night. We need our rest. I want to be on the boat before noon tomorrow. Since we still have to ride out to the coast, we have a very early morning ahead of us.”

John and Kellie left the library in search for somewhere to stay the night. After searching for the closest options and weighing the reviews of each for price and quality, they settled for a motel

room not as close as they would have liked but the price was more to their liking than the other options.

Kellie's nose wrinkled in dismay at the room that she entered across from John's room. The price may have been what they were expecting, but the quality was lacking. The reviews must have all been listed by lying family members of the proprietor. Kellie sighed at the faded, what once must have been red, carpet. The padding, if there was any, was so worn through that it felt like she was walking on painted cement. A dark grey path ran from the door to the bathroom and around to the each of the beds stained the faded carpet. This carpet probably had never been washed since the day it was put in, and it *might* have been vacuumed once a month, if that.

The comforters on both beds had stains and looked pretty dingy. Everyone knew those never got cleaned, but still. The room was so outdated with poor attempts at updating through the years that Kellie never would have been able to guess what time frame it was originally furnished in.

"Huh. I don't know if I want to even peek under the covers." Kellie groaned as several gross possibilities of what awaited her under the covers came to mind. "I don't know if this place will allow me to get any rest!" She fretted. "I'm not going to get any sleep at all. Maybe I should suggest other arrangements..." Kellie thought then remembered the NO REFUND sign on the check-in desk. Her face crumpled in defeat. Sleeping here it was – if, it was possible.

Kellie steeled herself to check under the covers by taking a deep breath. She walked over to one of the offending beds, then tossed aside the decorative pillows onto the other bed and gripped the top of the comforter and top sheet with the tips of her fingers. Holding her breath, Kellie counted to three in her mind. One... Two... Three! On three she flung both the comforter and top sheet back as fast as she could. She blinked.

There was not a bug in sight. More than that, she could hardly believe her eyes. The sheets were spotless: no stains and pearly white. These sheets were possibly the whitest sheets she had ever seen. Kellie puffed a relieved laugh. As an afterthought she pulled apart the comforter and the top sheet just to be sure. Then laying the top sheet back on the mattress Kellie removed the nasty comforter and tossed it onto the other bed. There was no way she was sleeping with that over her. She would rather freeze!

Kellie looked over the pillow before climbing into bed and laying her head on it. At last settled and as comfortable as one could be in such a dingy place, Kellie prayed and fell asleep repeating a plea to be left alone through night by any unseen critters.



The next morning Kellie awoke with a bad case of bed head. This was just the start of her complaints. In the daylight Kellie's room looked even worse. The shadows of night hid many offences that she had not noticed the night before.

After getting over the rough state of her sleeping arrangements all over again, Kellie felt the need to get clean. She swung her legs out from under the covers and slipped her feet into her shoes before her toes touched the grimy carpet. She flipped the sheets back over the mattress and made

her way to the bathroom and relieved herself. Once she had wet her hands, she reached for the soap... that wasn't there.

Kellie blinked and scanned the entire bare counter top. There was absolutely no soap. No bar soap. No shampoo and conditioner set out for the shower. There weren't even any towels. Did this room get forgotten when the cleaning crew came through? Kellie wiped her damp hands on the back of her hands, then peeked into the brown dirt encrusted shower and pulled back in disgust. There definitely wouldn't be any soap in *there*.

In desperation Kellie returned to the main area of the room and gave it a cursory glance, checking the surfaces for misplaced toiletries lying around. None. So, in a last ditch effort, Kellie prayed for a miracle each time she pulled open a drawer in the single four drawer chest of drawers that doubled as an entertainment center for an obsolete box television set. The television set even had rabbit ear antennae sticking out from the top.

Kellie came to the realization that she did not have any toiletries at her disposal. None. Kellie did not have a toothbrush - let alone toothpaste - brush, shampoo, or body wash. This was easily the worst morning of her life. This was even worse than when she woke up in Alison and Duncan's home disoriented from being kidnapped. At least there Alison had offered Kellie the use of her toiletries. Here, she was just plain out of luck.

Refusing to leave the room without refreshing her appearance at least a little, Kellie returned to the nasty bathroom. There she crudely combed her fingers through her hair in an attempt to manage the tangles. Then she dampened a wad of tissues, wiped her under her eyes to remove some of the mascara smears, and wiped her face. After all this she wet her finger and "brushed her teeth" as best as she could. Not feeling a whole lot better than before she sighed at her reflection and grimaced. Oh well. With a huff Kellie straightened and left the room.

Things seemed to only get "better" from there. John apparently did not of the same problems as Kellie had. He was cheery and seemed to have had a full night of sleep. He was bustling around as if this was the best night he had had in a long time. Kellie scowled at him. If looks could kill, hers would have knocked John into his grave the minute he entered Kellie's line of vision.

"What's your problem?" John asked while they were standing on the curb waiting to hail a taxi. Kellie looked at him as if he were daft.

"How was *your* room?" Kellie asked heatedly.

"That bad, *hu h?*" John chuckled. "I wondered what you would think..."

Kellie's scowl deepened. "It was awfully hard to sleep peacefully when I felt phantom bugs crawling on every inch of skin."

John chuckled softly. "I'm sorry." He said not sounding very apologetic.

Kellie nodded, her scowl softened only slightly. Then she noticed his wet hair and a sense of freshness about him. Her scowl was back in full force. "You have toiletries with you?!"

"*Ja.*" John cringed. He peeked at her from the corner of his eye. Kellie was steamed. Her mouth gaped open, closed, then open again. Before she could speak, John plunged ahead. "I thought

about that when I was falling asleep. I'm sorry." John said apologetically. Kellie snapped her mouth shut and looked away nostrils flaring at the injustice of this world. That a *man* might have the pleasure of cleaning up after such a horrid experience of sleeping in such an atrocity of accommodations, and the *lady* had no such luxury. Well, that was just not right! "We're going to go get breakfast, then we'll get you some things to freshen up a bit." John offered in an attempt to appease her.

"No!"

John looked at Kellie questioningly.

This time Kellie cringed. "I'm sorry." She said more softly. "Can we *please* go get me things to freshen up in first? *Then* we can eat after that?" She asked sweetly. Kellie even batted her eyelashes for good measure. John squinted in displeasure at delaying breakfast, but he supposed it would make Kellie feel better if she were able to enter the restaurant feeling clean.

"*Sikker*. We can do that." Kellie brightened brighter than the sun itself. In her happiness she forgot herself again and hugged him. Backing away bashfully she mumbled an apology. "Thank you." She said not meeting him in the eye.

"You're welcome." John said kindly.

The taxi arrived then, and they slid into the back seat. John had the driver pull over at the nearest retail store they came by. This was probably going to cost a pretty penny, but the money versus time spent was worth it because they really needed to get on the ocean ASAP. Kellie took awhile to choose some clothes, but when the items were rung up, John was pleasantly surprised. Kellie was a bargain shopper. None of the items' price tags exceeded \$10. John had not been paying any attention while she shopped, but she must have been shopping the clearance. John smiled at her as he paid the cashier.

"What's the smile for?" Kellie asked wonderingly.

"Nothing." John looked away and concentrated on finding a convenience store.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DRAKE AND GALE'S trek through the woods were pretty uneventful to say the least. The hike consisted of Drake leading, and Gale jumping at the sound of breaking branches passing it off as muscle spasms.

"You should probably get those spasms looked at soon, or they're likely to pull something out of joint." Drake suggested without turning around. Gale glared into his back. She had detected a hint of amusement in his tone and did not care for it right then. She was not scared *per se*... She was temporarily jumpy. Gale smiled pleased with her wording, but then realized that she still sounded scared. She pouted.

As they moved through the woods, Gale decided to hum and talk to Drake alternately to pass the time. Drake answered back sometimes, but he mainly just listened. Gale did not seem to need a partner in her conversations anyway.

After a while Drake told Gale that she needed to keep quiet. He told her that they were nearing the Nordoms' camp. Gale perked up at this because of her curiosity about these people – she assumed they were people – was just about suffocating her with its intensity. Gale kept vigilant for about five minutes and then had to be reminded to keep quiet. She had begun to hum or mumble to herself.

Drake did his level best to keep patient with her. She was on his last nerve. The girl really *could not* keep quiet. It just was not in her make-up.

"Hey!" Gale screeched. That's it! Drake spun around and was instantly confused by what he saw. Gale had frozen in place with one leg held aloft as if it were hurt. One of her arms reached for the leg held up, and her other hand was frozen in motion in front of her face as if she were swiping at something. Her small frame was tilted as if she had lost her balance and were about to fall, but she remained suspended.

Drake stared at Gale waiting for something to happen. He searched the trees from where he stood for anything that might cause such odd behavior. But, he saw only leaves on the tree branches above and leaves scattered over the ground, seemingly undisturbed by anyone but them. None of the surrounding bushes appeared disturbed. Strange.

Drake's eyebrows furrowed as he moved to assist Gale. The moment he took a step, Gale fell to the ground amongst the leaves.

“Ow!” Gale groaned as she hit the ground.

“What happened?” Drake asked warily.

“I twisted my ankle.” Gale said grumpily.

“And?”

Gale peeped up at him as she tried to raise herself up. “And what? What are you looking at me like that for?”

Drake stared back with his face scrunched in a frown. Unsure of what to make of the oddity that had just occurred, Drake ignored the question and proceeded to look around them thoroughly. He peered up at the trees trying to see around their leaves in the higher branches. After getting a good look at the trees and bushes around them, he came back to help Gale up. She had stayed where she was too absorbed in watching Drake prowl around the woods searching for something.

“You just going to lie there all day?” Drake asked reaching his hand down to assist her.

Gale smirked. “I was thinking about it.” She replied saucily. “What were you doing?”

Drake grabbed her under her arms and lifted her to her feet with little effort. He swiped most of the leaves off of her, and looked her in the eye. “You good?”

“Stop ignoring me!”

“You good?” Drake asked again after breathing a deep calming breath through his nose.

“Yes! Now, what were you doing?”

“Good. I was looking for who might be following us.”

“There’s someone following us?” Gale glanced around at the trees and bushes Drake had just inspected. “How do you know?”

“You were acting strange.” Drake let her go, and Gale nearly toppled to the floor of leaves all over again. With a surprised look Gale worked to gain her balance again. “I thought you said you were ‘good’.” Drake scowled.

“I *am* good.” Gale sniffed. “You just took me by surprise, that’s all.” She said haughtily. “My ankle just hurts.” She mumbled.

“Hm.” Drake frowned down at her ankle. “Well, walk slowly on it, and test how bad it is.” Gale did as she was told and tested her ankle. She winced quite a bit, but she clenched her teeth against making anymore sounds of distress. Drake’s mouth quirked at her show of bravery. Serious again he told her to take it even slower. The wincing continued but not as pronounced.

“Ugh! This is frustrating!” Gale exclaimed.

“I could carry you. We’re almost there...”

“No! You are absolutely NOT carrying me!” Gale yelled.

“Alright. I won’t.” Drake presented his palms and backed up a step.

"I mean, thank you for your offer, but no thank you." Gale said courteously. "You said someone might be following us. Who?"

Drake nodded then turned to continue leading the way at a very slow pace. "A Nordom." Drake tossed the answer to Gale's question over his shoulder. "You acted as if they had used an ability on you." Gale's eyes widened, but she remained silent. She kept much more vigilant to her surroundings and where she placed her feet this time.

As time wore on, and they slowly made their way deeper into the woods toward their destination; Gale groaned silently as oddly the pain in her ankle seemed to transfer to her head. The more her ankle felt better the more her head began to throb. It was an odd sensation. Many times Drake paused to look around or check on her, and she would bump into him. It was getting increasingly hard to focus.

Drake frowned in concern. This was very odd. Miraculously Gale's ankle seemed to be feeling better ten minutes after she could hardly walk on it. Now twenty minutes later, her head looked as if it were about to roll right off her shoulders. Gale looked miserable. Dark circles hung under eyes that she could hardly keep open.

"Hang in there." Drake encouraged gruffly. Gale's head rolled on her neck in acknowledgement. Drake's frown deepened. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather be carried?" He asked in concern. Gale jerked and grunted her distaste of his offer. Drake frowned but bit his tongue and continued on.

At last Drake and Gale entered a clearing containing three rings of camouflaged cabins. In the center of the smallest ring of cabins was a large fire pit filled with large logs ready to be lit. Surrounding the pit was a ring of even larger logs for seating. There wasn't a person in sight. The clearing was silent as a graveyard, then chaos erupted.

Men and women, ages ranging from what appeared to be eight to twenty-eight, poured from the trees and cabins around them. All of them wore bland colors. The clothes were made from simple patterns in materials of various shades of brown and cream. They all were shouting a sort of battle cry.

Drake groaned deep in his throat. Gale peered up at him in question. He rolled his eyes at the spectacle all around them. Keeping Gale where he could see her, Drake kept himself between her and the howling maniacs.

If they were not careful, someone was going to get hurt unnecessarily. Trying to talk with them when they were like this was a nuisance though, so Drake waited. Nordoms were people that he tended to avoid, but Gale's friends Jack and Stephanie were here. So, here he was being surrounded by these strange people for Gale's sake. Holding up his hands in a nonthreatening way, he waited and watched for any to get too close to Gale behind him.

At last, just moments before they were upon the intruders to their camp, a few of the Nordoms noticed that Drake and Gale were not here to pose a threat, and the first ring of attackers told of Drake and Gale's peaceful bearing to those behind them. That row also began to pass on the observation to the others around them. Eventually the whole mass was on the same page and the battle cry evaporated in the wind. Gale teetered where she stood at the sudden quiet. Her head had threatened to explode when the battle cry first erupted. Now, that it was gone, the relief was

so acute that she nearly toppled over. Drake pushed her upright and only pulled away his hand when he was sure that she was steady enough to stand on her own.

“Are you ok?” He asked concerned.

Gale’s pride kicked in, what was left of it. Her eyes widened a fraction, and she straightened her spine. “Of course.”

“Right.” Drake’s eyelids lowered in skepticism.

Gale stretched as tall as she could and scowled at his chest. “I am.” She insisted.

“Ok.” Drake said and turned to address the first Nordoms near them. “Where are her friends?” He gestured toward Gale. “You snatched them last night and left her behind. A guy and a girl, where are they?” He repeated.

The Nordoms looked around a bit conferring with their neighbors, and then a few of them pointed to a couple of cabins. Drake turned to look where they pointed. Sure enough, a guy and a girl like what Gale had earlier described to him, each emerged from a cabin. Jack and Stephanie, dressed in new clothes from the ones they had escaped from, had come out to see what the commotion was about.

“Gale!” Stephanie exclaimed excitedly. She ran down the cabin’s porch steps to her friend wrapping her up in a tight squeeze. Gale hugged her back as tightly as her headache would allow. “I’m so glad you’re ok!” Stephanie said as she pulled away holding Gale at arm’s length. Taking a good look at her, Stephanie asked, “You are ok, aren’t you?” She eyed Drake over Gale’s shoulder. “Who’s this?”

Gale shook with silent giggles before wincing in pain. “I’m really ok, and this is Drake. He helped me find you, and he’s the one that found me in the woods when we got trampled by these hooligans.” Gale explained with a weak smile. The throbbing in her head just increased another notch.

Stephanie smiled at Drake. “Thank you for helping Gale.” Drake nodded solemnly watching Gale closely. “We had gone back later to try to find her. But she was gone after we finally got these people to listen. It took us forever to get them to understand that they had left someone behind.” Turning to Gale, Stephanie explained. “That night we apparently had gotten too close to their hiding place. Their watchmen captured us to be sure that we weren’t a threat to them only to find out that we were the same as them!” She laughed at the misunderstanding now that Gale was with them safe and sound. At least, she hoped that she was sound. She eyed her friend suspiciously.

“She should rest.” Drake said simply, more or less ignoring Stephanie’s explanation. “She will stay with you?” He asked looking at Stephanie now.

“Yes, of course.” Stephanie’s smile faded to a look of concern that Gale hadn’t interrupted her even once. “What’s wrong with her? She’s usually a lot more... bubbly.”

"*She* is right here and doing fine. I just have a small headache." Gale said exasperated. Her headache was getting worse and a bed never sounded so good. "So, a bed sounds good. How soon could we get there?"

Drake spoke to Stephanie as if Gale had not spoken. "She fell in the woods and twisted her ankle. But now she has a really back headache, and her ankle seems fine. It is very strange. I think she should rest."

Stephanie nodded. "Come on, Gale, there's a bed with your name on it in my cabin." She said kindly.

"Thank you!" Gale exclaimed relieved they were finally making progress toward that bed, and that they were addressing her again. Drake waited until both girls moved to the cabin that Stephanie was using. Jack had come down a ways from his cabin to listen to what was going on. He stopped the girls and spoke with them. Stephanie explained shortly the gist of the conversation that he had missed. Jack nodded and squeezed Gale's shoulder affectionately then let them go on to their cabin. Drake frowned at Jack's touch and turned to find out where he would be staying the night.

Turning Drake discovered that the Nordoms had mostly all gone home back to their cabins now that the threat turned out to be nothing. There remained a few stragglers for the evening around the fire pit and near some of the inner ring of cabins.

After speaking with a Nordom or two, they had agreed to let Drake stay with Jack. As kindly as he could, he thanked them and headed over in the direction of the cabin Jack was staying in only to run into him. Jack apparently had been coming to invite Drake himself. The two introduced themselves and took each other's measure before heading back to the cabin they would be sharing. Neither seemed too intent on holding any conversation in that moment.

As Jack and Drake neared their cabin, Drake noticed Gale standing on the porch of her cabin. Stephanie was nowhere to be seen. She must have already gone inside. The door hung open as if Gale were about to enter with her, but refrained for some reason. Drake's brow furrowed. Weird. Drake stood at the door of his cabin preparing to enter with Jack like Gale had prepared to enter her cabin with Stephanie. He paused watching Gale.

As he watched, Drake became more confused by Gale's behavior by the minute. She seemed tense about something on her mind when she suddenly became lax. Her shoulders slumped in defeat, and her head hung low succumbing to some decision that she had made. Drake watched as Gale tottered slowly and unsteadily down the porch steps of her cabin. What was she doing? Shaking his head he turned around to find her staring up at him from the bottom of *his* porch stairs. Frowning he walked slowly down the steps to her, watching her very carefully. Gale's eyes widened; otherwise, her stance or facial expression didn't change. She stood waving gin the wind as if held up by unseen strings waiting for Drake to do something.

Gale was not sure exactly why she had walked over to Drake. She was about to enter the cabin with Stephanie to go lay her throbbing head on a blessed pillow when her feet would not budge. Frustrated Gale looked down at her feet and willed them to move. This only caused more pain in her head and her knees nearly buckled because of it. Standing there fighting tears of frustration and pain, she felt a release of tension from her person and stopped to breathe at the sudden relief.

Gale's head suddenly felt light but still pained. Confused she looked around and noticed that the clearing had cleared of all Nordoms. They must have gone back to whatever they were doing now that the "danger" was dealt with.

Gale saw Drake walking over to Jack's cabin next to hers and Stephanie's. The closer he came the more tension dropped from her muscles. She tried to enter the cabin once more. Still her legs would not budge. Gale frowned in confusion. Blinking very slowly and with effort, Gale could feel her mind shutting down. She was tired of fighting the weird with what she thought was logic. She was tired of thinking. Closing her eyes, she let go. Gale began to move down the steps very slowly and carefully. When she opened her eyes again she was looking up at Drake on the porch steps of his and Jack's cabin. Surprise caused her eyes to widen. Gale swayed at the effort it was taking to stay upright. This was when Drake made his way down the porch steps to her.

Drake took her in from head to toe searching for the cause of her strange behavior. Finally, not seeing anything at the surface, he determined to search for other sources of the problem. Drake squinted at her closely then his eyes suddenly relaxed. He closed his eyes, breathed deep, and looked down at her again with startling green eyes. They seemed to have a light shining behind them. Entranced, Gale leaned slightly forward. Her eyelids lowered halfway, and her head tilted back so that she could look directly into Drake's eyes. Having changed his eyesight like Jack would have done, he could see the source of the problem. There was a transparent noose laying loosely around her neck and the length of "rope" attached was snagged on Drake's clothing. Drake reached for the noose around her neck. He grabbed it and the length of rope and threw it behind her to the ground. Gale flinched and shuddered. With a pop and a puff of smoke, it was gone.

Gale moaned and slumped forward. Drake grasped her shoulders to keep her from falling over. Gale sighed long and hard. Her hands came up and grasped his forearms for support. She attempted to stand on her own and look up at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead her knees buckled, and she groaned.

"Shhh. Relax." Drake coaxed. "Take your time. Your mind has to rest." Gale whimpered; her head lolling to one side. She had furrowed her brow in pain. Drake murmured soft encouragement to her. Gale finally took one long shuddering breath before her eyes fluttered open. Her grip on his arms tightened as she struggled to take some of her weight off of him.

"Gale. Don't worry about it. Take. Your. Time." Drake insisted, his soft tone laced in a command. With that she sagged. "That's what I thought." He chuckled, a deep cavernous sound. He scooped her up and took her over to her cabin. With as little jostling as possible, he knocked on the door frame with the toe of his boot just as Stephanie was coming in search of Gale.

Stephanie exclaimed. "What did you do to her?!"

"Where's her room?" Drake ignored the question.

"Back there." Stephanie pointed behind her, but didn't move away from the door. "What happened?" She repeated sternly. "I thought she was right behind me..." Drake pushed past her and stopped at one of the rooms. He raised his eyebrows at Gale's roommate. She pursed her lips and nodded crossing her arms in frustration. Drake walked right in, tucked Gale into the bed, and stopped by the front door before leaving. He looked pointedly at Stephanie.

“Leave her alone. Let her sleep. She will have a splitting headache in the morning, so be gentle with her.” With that he left leaving a gaping Stephanie to bristle alone about her unanswered questions. With a huff she peeked in on Gale slumbering peacefully. Satisfied Stephanie headed to her own room to bed down for the night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KELLIE FOUND all the items she needed to be adequately clean and refreshed from her long night in the icky motel, and John paid for them. John found a place for them to get a good breakfast while Kellie changed. When she came out, Kellie looked much better and wore a brilliant smile of appreciation to feel mostly clean after that horrid night. John on the other hand was wasting away of starvation and was currently thinking of all that he would order if they ever got to the restaurant.

“Thank you!” Kellie said emphatically.

“You’re welcome, now, let’s go get some food, shall we?” John rushed, ushering her from the store to the waiting taxi at the curb. John told the driver the address and not to waste time getting there.

“Hungry much?” Kellie asked eyeing him with a teasing grin. John was sitting very rigid, and his eyes were darting from the driver to the scenery as if he was not sure the driver had picked up on his not so subtle urge to get there fast.

John frowned at Kellie. “*Selvfølgelig*, I am. You took long enough to get changed.” He scolded.

“I’m sorry.” Kellie chuckled. “But, I did have to get ready in a public bathroom with smaller and more limited resources than I’m used to.” She pointed out. She lifted from the floor between her feet the drawstring bag that John also got for her to hold her new belongings in for emphasis. He scowled back at her before returning his gaze out his window. Kellie chuckled again making a mental note for future not to bother John in the morning until he had had his breakfast.

Eventually the driver got them to the restaurant, and John shoved the fare at him excluding a tip. Without waiting for Kellie, he made his way inside and got them a table. Kellie sat down and picked up her menu while John impatiently waited for their waitress. Kellie tried to be quick in her choices.

John was much more cordial after he had feasted on three plates of food. Kellie almost felt physically full after just watching the quick work in which he made of all that food. John quirked an amused eyebrow at her when he had finally sat back in his seat to sip his water and noticed Kellie watching him with a look of repulsion on her face. Her plate was barely half eaten.

“*Hva?* Never seen a man put that much food away before, *kjæreste?*” Kellie shook her head and tentatively took another bite of her food. John bellowed in laughter. “*Vi vil*, get used to it. I’ll be

putting away similar servings for the rest of the trip. You should try to eat up what you have now. We will be having a late lunch. We have a lot of ground to cover.” John chuckled. “Or ‘ocean to cover,’ I should say.” John was definitely in a better mood now that he had eaten.

John let Kellie finish her meal in peace while he tapped away on his phone and laptop. On his phone in his maps app, he found that it was roughly twenty minutes to their rented boat, so he decided that they would pay a taxi for their last trip on the mainland. Through research on his laptop, John discovered that the lab on the island did not seem to exist at all. There was no record of any laboratory or company of any kind, aside from some small shops, on the island. John furrowed his brow at the lack of gossip about any odd goings-on’s on the island.

Well, the internet was only one source with which he could find things out. Once they were on the island the mouths of the people would become their source of information. John’s mouth quirked as he thought, *People loved to talk*. Getting people to talk and merely listening while they ran their mouths was the best way to obtain information in the most inconspicuous way.

Kellie cleared away hers and John’s trash before sitting across from him again. She watched him think as she scrolled through screens on his computer. Kellie was glad God had sent her someone with the necessary skills to find her father. She had all the confidence in the world that God had sent the perfect man for her. John was the perfect man for the *job* – she amended. Kellie felt sure that she would be bringing her father home to her mother for the first time in years thanks to this man. God worked in some mysterious ways to be sending her someone all the way from Norway.

“You ready?” John asked pulling Kellie from her thoughts.

“Yes.” She answered with a smile.

“*Flott*. Time to get going. We really should have left a few minutes ago.”

“Are those minutes going to cost us?” Kellie asked with any overly worried expression.

“*Nei*.” John answered, eyes lowered in a bored way. Kellie grinned.

“Good.” She stood with a spring in her step. “Let’s go save my father!”

John smiled. “Let’s do that.” He packed up his laptop and tossed his duffle over his shoulder. On their way out Kellie halted mid-step with a gasp. John frowned down at her. “*Hva?*”

“Hannah!”

“Hvem?” He asked bewildered. “Who’s Hannah?”

“Hannah! She’s my best friend from work. She was kidnapped with me at the charity event she talked me into going to with her.”

“Ah.” John sighed deeply through his nose. Another person to save. He’d definitely be saving the world before this job was over. “She didn’t escape with you?”

Kellie shook her head enthusiastically. “She was too scared.” Her face crumpled in remorse. “I can’t believe that I had forgotten about her until now.”

“I can.” John said not so sympathetically.

Kellie gaped up at him. "What?!"

"It's not like you haven't been trying to save your own skin up until now." John pointed out sarcastically. Kellie just stared, blinked, then crossed her arms.

"You're not a very empathetic person are you?" She accused with a scowl.

"*Nei*, I'm not." John admitted outright.

"Well, Hannah is scared and my best friend. I should have at least been praying for her all this time." Kellie glared.

"Praying for her?"

Kellie chided herself for forgetting that John was a new believer in Christ. "Yes. I should have been praying for her that God would give her courage, and also that the bad men would not hurt her until she could be saved." She explained more kindly.

"You think God could do that?"

"God can do anything." Kellie said without hesitation.

John licked his lips thinking of how to reword his question. "Do you think that God *would* do all that?"

"I think so." Kellie answered honestly. "I think He would give her the strength to endure her trial until He sent help. It's in His character, I think, based off what I know of Him."

John's eyebrows pinched together as he processed this. "Hm." He turned on his heel and proceeded out of the restaurant to continue thinking and hail a taxi.

"Well?" Kellie asked when she caught up.

"Well?' What?" John repeated.

"Are we going to save her?" Kellie clarified.

"*Vi vil*, I don't see how I, we, can't." John sighed. "We're going to save your *far*, and we know that she is in the same place and predicament – might as well."

Kellie grinned. "Thanks, John!" She sighed in relief. "I think I'll pray for both of them on the way to the boat." She thought aloud.

John huffed since his mind had not entirely processed the other piece of information Kellie had thrown at him yet. "What do you mean you will pray for them?" He asked.

"I mean that I will be talking to God about my concerns for them and asking Him to take care of them until we get there." Kellie explained.

"You can just *talk* to God any time?" John asked surprised.

Kellie squinted up at him. "Of course, I can. You can, too, you know."

"Really?"

“Really. Just like you did when you asked Jesus to be your Saviour.”

Just then the taxi rolled up to the curb and John and Kellie slid into the back seat. John gave the driver the address to the boat’s dock and sat back to mull over what Kellie had told him. John thought about all those years that he had “prayed” for answers about God. Had God been listening and sent Kellie into John’s life to give those very answers?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GALE WOKE up in her room in the cabin she and Stephanie shared and was surprised to find that she once again did not recognize her surroundings. She rolled her eyes then groaned. A head-throbbing, ear-ringing migraine was currently splitting her melon open at the seams. As if sensing Gale's need, Stephanie entered her room at that moment.

"Hey, sleepyhead, I thought you would never wake up." She said softly. "I bring gifts." She brought over a glass of water and two aspirin tablets and a stack of new clothes. Stephanie handed Gale the water and pills and set the clothes on the nearly bare nightstand beside the bed. Gale had not noticed the nightstand or the single homemade, off-white candle standing in its short wooden candlestick that also looked homemade.

"Thanks." Gale whispered back. Stephanie smiled pityingly back at her.

"Are you up to talking?" Stephanie asked tentatively. "Your guardian-angel-man told me to be gentle and be easy with you."

Gale's eyes popped open with indignation then squinted at the bright sunlight streaming in through a window in her room. "Oh, he did, did he?" Gale popped the pills and swallowed them with more vigor than she meant to use. Wincing at the pain the aspirin had yet a chance to touch, Gale took a calming breath to think more clearly.

"Yeah. He seems pretty guardian-ish, protective of you."

"Bossy, more like." Gale grumbled.

"You would think that you guys were an item or something. But, that would be ridiculous, since you guys just met!" Stephanie rambled ending in a giggle.

"Where is he?" Gale interrupted, not listening to Stephanie in the least. "Did he leave?"

"No." Stephanie gave Gale an odd look, then explained. "He's probably over in Jack's cabin. That's where he ended up staying last night. The guys are putting together a plan of attack."

"Without us?" Gale asked appalled.

"Yep. I thought that I should stay here with you until you woke up, so you weren't alone." Stephanie smiled.

"Thanks." Gale said slowly. Well, the aspirin had not had enough time to kick in yet, but Gale was going to lose it if she did not get some answers. "Let's go join the guys. They shouldn't get to have all the fun." Gale said resolutely.

Stephanie's eyebrows lowered in concern. "Are you sure that you're up for it?"

Gale scowled. "Of course!"

Stephanie leaned back with the force of her friend's words. "Ok." She said with her hands up in a motion of surrender.

"I'm sorry. I just need food and answers." Gale apologized.

"I can solve the food problem." Stephanie offered with a smile and left to fulfill the request. Gale smiled back and followed slowly to the cabin's kitchenette after changing into the clothes that Stephanie had brought for her. It felt good to be out of the compound's standard rags.

The kitchenette was quaint and small, but it had all the necessary parts. In no time flat Stephanie had a decent breakfast in front of Gale. Gale stared appreciatively at the eggs and sausage patties and had to be reminded to "say grace" before digging in. Gale thanked the Lord for her food and ate up. Quickly, the dishes were put away in the sink, and both girls were off to the cabin next door. Gale banged on the door much to her head's dismay. Jack answered her knock.

"Gale!" He said enthusiastically. "Glad you're up and about. Come on in, ladies." He ushered the both of them into the cabin, and Gale made a beeline for Drake who was sitting at the dining table. He made as if to get up, but Gale motioned for him to stay seated.

"No. Stay seated." She plopped down in front of him and propped her heavy head on one hand. "Drake, I need answers, and I know you have them." Gale said in a no-nonsense tone.

Drake nodded slowly for her to continue. Jack and Stephanie both exchanged a look as they entered the kitchenette, and Jack shrugged. Both took a seat around the small table and listened.

"Alright, what do you want to know?" Drake asked patiently.

"Everything!" Gale said exasperatedly. Drake raised an eyebrow. "Nordoms. Who are they, and why do they get under your skin?"

Drake exhaled. "Nordoms. They are what the compound's men would call rogues. Nordoms are other escapees like us that have gotten away and taken refuge in the woods. They get under my skin because they are an unorganized group of immature adolescents with the intent of taking down the compound and all it stands for. These new abilities given through the serum are misused among them. The 'lasso' you received was done in jest. They do these things at the expense of others not knowing or caring how their ability truly affects the other person. If I had not caught yours in time, you probably would have died; and he or she would merely apologize for the 'accident'. There would be no consequences. The leadership in place are merely children as well with no world experience. That is why they annoy me. They have no care, most of them. They're bloodthirsty children with no boundaries." Drake sounded like an old man tired of the mischievousness of little children.

"I have encountered a few responsible ones." Jack volunteered on the Nordoms behalf. Drake looked at him as if he'd sprouted another head.

"Is it possible?" He asked doubtful.

"It is. They're the older ones, of course. They are the ones that began this outfit. The only problem is that they're not recognized as leaders. They are having a difficult time managing this growing mass. They need help, but many of the younger ones are getting used to the freedom and are having a hard time getting with the program." Jack explained what he had gleaned from the older of the Nordoms.

"Why are they called Nordoms? It sounds like 'dumb lords' backwards." Gale snickered. Stephanie laughed.

Drake chuckled under his breath at her antics. "It does, now that you mention it." He agreed. "I don't really know why they have named themselves a ridiculous sounding name." He shook his head. The others laughed.

"Alright." Gale spoke up. "In all seriousness, these Nordoms could come in handy later..."

"She's right. If we could just get them all on the same page, we would have a formidable force against the compound."

"Exactly." Jack said. "But, before that we have to cut the compound off from all outside ties. We have to stop the compound's funds at the source." Jack motioned to Drake. "That's what we were discussing when you girls came in."

Drake nodded confirmation when the girls looked at him. "Since I have escaped, I too have been looking for ways to shut down the vile operation." I have found out some key information that will help us do just that." Gale and Stephanie leaned in hanging on his every word.

"Well?!" Gale exclaimed. "Don't keep us in suspense. Out with it!"

"I have discovered, first, that the doctor they have injecting everyone is actually from the States."

Stephanie wrinkled her forehead. "Like the USA – States?"

"Yes. He is from America."

"Wait!" Gale shrieked. "We're not in the US?"

"No, Gale, we're not. I thought you knew that." Jack said surprised at this revelation. Stephanie looked at her friend in sympathy. Poor girl's world had been turned upside down.

"Well, where are we?" Gale asked tentatively.

"We're actually close to the US." Drake answered. "While I was poking around for answers, I found some tourists' maps that marked our location in relation to the United States. We're actually right next door in the Atlantic." Gale's face shone with fascination with this piece of news. "I also found that it is an easy task to get to the States. We can ride a boat over and land in New Jersey."

Stephanie raised her hand then blushed. "Why do we want to go to New Jersey if the problem is here?" She spoke up.

"We want to go there because that's where the man responsible for the whole project lives." Jack spoke up. Gale and Stephanie raised their eyebrows in unison.

"There is a man that is funding the compound from the United States." Drake filled them in. "He has been sending parts and other supplies from the US for years."

"How did you come across this juicy piece of news?" Gale asked intrigued.

"I kept track of any incoming or outgoing mail." Drake answered.

"Hm. I like it. How did you not get caught?" Stephanie asked.

"I had been out for long enough not to be recognized and delivered what I stole along the way for information so that no red flags came up on their radar." Drake explained.

"You wanted information without them catching on that anyone was onto them." Jack nodded appreciatively. "I like it."

"Why do we care if they know that we're onto them?" Gale piped up rebelliously.

"Because, we don't want them to attack us before we're ready. We want to attack *them* before they're ready." Stephanie answered slowly when she caught on. Gale mouthed a large "O", but kept silent for once digesting all the information.

"So, what do you think, Drake?" Jack asked. "Do you think that we could shut down the investor in the US?"

"I think that we could. He doesn't know that we are coming, and the element of surprise almost always wins in the end." Drake said optimistically.

"I say, we do it." Stephanie said resolutely. "The evil men need to be stopped and if not we then who?"

"I'm in. I don't want to be running or hiding for the rest of my days, and these guys really *should* be stopped." Jack agreed wholeheartedly.

"Well, Drakey-boy, you going to help us do that?" Gale asked cheekily. "Seems like you're the man with the plan and all the answers."

Drake chuckled. "I don't know about all the answers, but I think that I have a plan."

"Great! We're in business!" Gale cheered. "What's for lunch?" All three of the others looked back at their redheaded friend in surprise at the sudden change in topic. "We can't iron out any kinky plans without food in our bellies. I'm hungry. What do we got?" She rose from the table to investigate the kitchenette. The three onlookers exchanged grins. The aspirin had kicked in.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE TAXI drive to the coast was smooth and uneventful. Kellie took her burdens to the Lord in prayer and when she was finished answered some questions for John on how she typically prayed. This was a very new and fun experience for her. It was neat to be able to help another child of Christ grow and understand her Lord as she did. She could not imagine living as long as John did without Jesus in her life... Kellie thanked God again for allowing John to be receptive and helping her show John how to accept Christ as his personal Saviour. She prayed that for as long as John was helping her that she would be just as helpful in this area of his life. God is good.

John seemed satisfied for the time being in asking Kellie questions and lean back to practice what he had been taught. He talked to God. For the first time John actually knew in his soul that He listened. This was great! John was not on his own anymore. He had help and strength more than his own. This was awesome!

Next time he came through his home town John would have to share this with his family. He wished that he had listened to his mom and taken her more seriously. John could have had Christ in his life much sooner. Pride was a stubborn companion, and It took just the right persuasion to be moved. John peeked at Kellie and thanked God for sending her his way, or rather for sending him her way. He was overjoyed to finally have someone that could give the answers he had been seeking.

Kellie was getting giddy the closer that they got to the coast and their boat. The closer they got to the coast, the closer they got to her father and helping him. Kellie still could hardly believe it that after all these years her father really could be alive, and they could bring him home at last! She could not wait to see her mother's face when her father walked in the door. Kellie had asked John if she could call her mother and to tell her the news, but he suggested that she wait to just bring him home. Kellie was disappointed at first, but she was glad now. It would be more special to see her mother's reaction in person rather than listening to her over the phone.

Finally at the coast, Kellie followed John down to the dock after sending away their taxi. John spoke with the owner on the planks just in front of the boat about some of the intricacies of this particular model. Kellie just wished that he would hand over the money, so they could get going. This was so exciting! Kellie had never ridden a boat before.

John finally handed over the money, and soon they were settled in their rented boat. John and Kellie were off to the island to save her father. Kellie had never fidgeted so much in her life. The

four-hour boat ride was the longest four hours of her life! Especially, since John kept eyeing the quickly gathering clouds.

Even though the day was young yet, it was dark with the promise of rain. But, alas, they made it to the island thanks to John's boating expertise, and his genius in discovering the coordinates of the island. Kellie was so eager to get started that she nearly jumped from the boat before they came into port. John held her back even after they tied off the boat to speak to her. Kellie brought her impatient gaze up to his serious one. Just then a few drops splattered on her face.

"What?" She asked blinking the raindrops away.

"Just hold on a minute. I know you're antsy to get started." John cautioned pointedly looking at her shuffling feet. Kellie looked down at her feet, and bashfully put an end to their shuffling. "Look, we can't just storm the island, grab your dad, and bring him back to New Jersey." Kellie's face fell even as she nodded her head in understanding. Good, he had her attention. Glancing at the sky squinting as the rain began to pour even as they stood there. John pushed Kellie to move forward with a hand to the small of her back. "We will go into town and try to glean some information first. Kellie," He looked her in the eye, "we likely won't be taking your father home today."

Kellie's eyes widened then lowered as her giddiness ebbed away. "Oh. Right."

John's eyes softened. "I meant to have this talk before we got here. We have to feel out the people and get as much information as we can before we can save your dad. We know he's here and probably kept confined somewhere, but that is it. We need to find out where that is and just how to get to him." John shrugged his bag to a more comfortable position on his shoulder as they pushed onward through the rain and slushy dirt roads into the small village. He continued, "I will do most of the talking until I feel that you understand how to go about this. Since you have the most invested with your father being the objective, I will probably not let you do very much because you will likely get too excited and alert someone to our real purpose. We don't want word getting back to the people holding your father. Do you understand the plan?"

With her eyebrows knitted together in concentration and her eyes squinted against the rain, Kellie nodded. "You do the talking. Gather information. Find Dad. Take him home."

"Yep!" John said. "Alright, I'm hungry. Let's go get some food." With that they hustled into the nearest building to gain direction to someplace to eat.



A few hours later, John had gleaned a little information. Thankfully it was valuable, and their time was not wasted. John and Kellie made their way to the village inn they had been directed to by a kind old shop keeper. The inn was highly recommended for the landlord's warm hospitality and homemade recipes. The rain stopped and started up again in vigor within the fifteen minutes it took John and Kellie to trudge on over to the inn.

John and Kellie were unable to make much out through the rain to discern the size of the inn. Before they entered, the structure's shadow hinted at a quaint log cabin. When they entered, they discovered that they were indeed deceived.

Kellie and John barged in through the door just as a round, homey woman with a smile and countenance that made Kellie miss her mother was passing by on her way to the kitchen to have the cook make preparations for dinner. Kellie fell in love right away with the landlord's wife who introduced herself as Mia-Maze and chattered and fussed over their soggy state. The lady immediately whisked Kellie's chilled and dripping self away to one of the many rooms of the single story inn.

Standing in the middle of the open room wrapped in a warm grey blanket the landlady seemingly produced from thin air, Kellie surveyed her surroundings. Kellie noticed while she shivered from cold and curiosity a queen-sized, four-poster bed standing proudly in the center of the wall to her right. A single door stood open to a closet of sorts in the same wall. A wardrobe shared the wall directly across from Kellie along with a simple table and chair and one window. Upon later inspection Kellie would discover that the window was free of any netting or glass. Only a thick piece of leather just an inch all around larger than the window was rolled above the opening in the wall or tacked to the wall around the window to close it. The wall to Kellie's left displayed a moderately sized fireplace in the shape and style of a mound of round stones with a chimney made of the same round stones snaking up the wall and into the ceiling. Kellie looked for the source of light that illuminated the room. There wasn't a large light centered in the middle of the room, rather a small glowing bulb protruded from each of the four corners in the room.

Mia-Maze stoked a warm fire in the fireplace then turned and smiled at Kellie. She waddled her way between the two round boulders placed on either side of a white wolf's fur rug splayed before the fire. Gently Mia-Maze grasped Kellie's fingers of her left hand and directed her to sit on one of the large boulders. To Kellie's immense surprise she sank down into the greyish-green boulder.

"Oh!" Kellie exclaimed in delight.

"It's stuffed full of down." Mia-Maze explained with a tender smile with a hint of owner's pride. "Is it to your liking?"

"Oh, definitely!" Kellie said emphatically. "I was only surprised." She reassured the landlady with a smile.

Kellie was served a bath in a primitive sort of way as she sat snug in the down-filled beanbag sort of chair. A large wooden tub that had been sealed watertight was brought to her room and sat directly before the fire. Moments later a small sprite of a woman brought large steaming buckets one after the other into Kellie's room to fill the tub. One extra was set on the hearth to stay warm for rinsing she was told. A couple of square rags were draped over the edge of the tub and a bar of homemade soap was set beside the bucket on the hearth.

The landlady brought a tray piled high with food and hot tea and set it on the small table near the only window in the room. The sprite-woman followed behind with a fluffy fur lined robe that she laid nicely on the bed along with a towel she laid neatly on the other chair opposite Kellie. The woman smiled and nodded politely as she backed toward the door to exit while telling Kellie to pull the rope near the door if she were in need of anything. Kellie marveled at the service. This island was definitely not culturally up to date, but she could definitely deal!

It was a delicious meal the landlady had brought. Nothing on the plate was anything Kellie recognized, but she dared not ask what it was because everything tasted wonderful. The landlord's wife came to check on Kellie after her bath was taken to have it dismissed. Kellie had been

wondering what was the use of the large pot in the closet in which the door had been left open. Upon investigation, Kellie discovered that aside from the large pot, the small room that could only be three feet by three feet, only held a shelf about waist high with more square rags folded neatly upon it and a wooden flap hanging on hinges with a small knob at the base. She peeked through the small door of sorts and discovered it led outside. A fire exit? It seemed too small for that. Kellie asked Mia-Maze about the closet.

“My dear, that is the chamber pot closet. The rags are to clean yourself and the door is for one of the help to dump it out. Another of the help is tasked with removing the waste from the premises.” By her smug look this process seemed to be obtained by the more wealthy or upper-class people in the village. Kellie could only stare in consternation. Primitive indeed!

John came and found her after he had eaten himself and only had good things to say about the inn and its owners. John had been ushered to his own room, and he had been treated in the same way served by the landlord himself and a wiry sort of man. The landlord had introduced himself as Nick-a-Nock – yes, really, that was his name – and had given them a wonderful deal on their rooms, Kellie discovered. John only shrugged at Kellie’s disgust at not having indoor plumbing. She almost – *almost* – wished that she were back at that horrid motel on the mainland.

John told her his plans to go out again the next day to eavesdrop on the people and see what else he would find out. So, far he had discovered that no one seemed to know that there was a suspicious facility on the island. The people of this village were completely unaware that there was anything odd going on around them at all.

The only valuable piece of information that seemed to catch any one’s eye were the many large shipments from the mainland that frequently showed up. No one knew who sent them or what they were for. They only noticed that they were large and were assumed to be machinery parts for something big. No one cared to investigate. In fact John only heard this piece of news from a handful of villagers who frequented the post office.

John hoped to discover much more in the next two days, or he and Kellie would have very little to work with to save her father. This would make the operation take a whole lot longer and risk being discovered before they could take action to save Dr. Yassiff.

John wished Kellie a good night and retired to his room. He pulled out his Bible and read it for the first time through new eyes. Everything he read took on a new light. Something in him had really changed. More like, Someone had moved in making the words in the Scriptures come to life. John read with a renewed hunger, and only quit when his eyes refused to stay open. John sighed in contentment. Finally, he was able to get his answers. He could read them for himself or ask Kellie. John smiled as his drifted off to sleep.

Kellie sunk down under her covers grateful for not having to worry about what might be crawling in them tonight. After saying her prayers for her father and Hannah, Kellie also smiled as she fell asleep to the constant patter of raindrops on the roof. She had a good feeling about tomorrow. She and John would discover some answers – she just knew it!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DRAKE, GALE, Jack, and Stephanie discussed a few more of the plans before putting some into action. These plans included talking with the leaders of the Nordoms and securing their help before the four of them headed over to the mainland. Drake and Jack went to talk to the leaders while the girls packed away some things that might come in handy on their journey.

Drake and Jack discussed the approach that they would take with the Nordom leaders as they made their way passed the central bonfire to the other side of the inner ring and to three cabins in the second ring. Since neither were sure who to talk to first, Jack and Drake just ascended the first set of porch steps that they approached and knocked on the door. Nordom Dean answered their knock.

“Yes?” Nordom Dean opened the door only a little and peered out at them. Nordom Dean was merely a leader because he was the one of the oldest at twenty-eight. He really had no desire to lead and typically went along with the other three leaders’ decisions. The man was a long twig. He was tall at six foot six inches, but he was all bone with barely any fat or muscle to speak of. His hair was short and dull orange, and his eyes were beady and deep set into his head. The first thing that Drake or Jack noticed was Nordom Dean’s Adam’s apple. It was huge and protruded from his neck nearly as far as the man’s chin stuck out into the air. “What do you two want?” He asked the two men on his porch none too kindly.

“We’d like to have a word with you.” Jack spoke for them both. “May we come in?”

Nordom Dean’s eyebrows went up and his eyes peered around Drake and Jack in concern. “There isn’t trouble is there?” He unconsciously nearly shut the door on them.

Drake stopped the motion of the door with his hand and pushed it open again – wider this time. “Not yet. Can we come in?” Drake was unable to hold back all annoyance from his tone.

Dean caught on and became stubborn. “No.” His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, and he jutted his chin at Drake and attempted to shut the door in his face. Jack stepped in. Pushing Drake back with one hand and keeping the door from being slammed in their faces with his other hand. Jack spoke to Nordom Dean in a consoling tone while glaring at Drake.

“We’re not here to cause trouble, Nordom...?”

“Dean.” The Nordom leader answered stiffly.

“Nordom Dean. We’re here to discuss a plan of sorts with you and the other leaders. May we please come in and explain?”

Nordom Dean inhaled and glared at Drake. If only *he* didn't have to come in too. *He* worried Dean. After fretting over the prudence of letting Drake enter his cabin, he finally relented and bade them enter, swinging the door open wide at last. "Have a seat." He instructed, waving at his simple down-filled sofa while he plopped down in his down-filled bag-chair across from the sofa. The man's sofa was an elongated down-stuffed bag set upon a wooden frame that raised it up a little ways off the ground. His chair also sat upon a smaller frame.

"So, what is this plan, and what does it have to do with the Nordom leaders?" Nordom Dean asked anxious to be done with the business as soon as possible.

Jack glanced pointedly at Drake, and Drake reclined on the surprisingly not uncomfortable couch with a grunt of assent to keep quiet. "Nordom Dean, we need your help - and the help of the other leaders, too." Nordom Dean's eyebrows rose in surprise, and crossed his arms in a show of confidence that he didn't have.

"What kind of help do you need from us?" He asked slowly.

"We need your support, and for you to unite the Nordoms to work together."

"Support? Unite the Nordoms?" Dean asked blankly. "Why?"

"We," Jack gestured to Drake and himself, "need support for our plan to take down the compound and its leaders. We need you to organize the Nordoms to fight with us when the time comes."

Nordom Dean's eyes went wide in disbelief. His arms fell slack, and his jaw dropped – all pretense of bravery abandoned. Jack began to doubt the wisdom of approaching Nordom Dean before the other leaders. "You want to attack the compound?! The very people who abducted us and used us as guinea pigs? Those people?!" He asked in shock. They couldn't mean the compound guarded by hundreds of armed men. They couldn't be talking of *them*! But, they could. Jack nodded in affirmation. "No!" He shouted. Drake snorted, and Jack flinched. Nordom Dean jumped from his chair and paced back and forth the short distance of his living room. "No. It's impossible." He said forcibly. He scowled at Drake and Jack. "You don't know what you're getting yourselves into. It's not right for you to drag all the rest of us down with you, too." He said accusingly. The man's beady eyes were wild with fright. Jack opened his mouth to speak, but Drake interrupted from his lounging position on the sofa.

"You are a coward then." He drawled. Nordom Dean's eyes blazed fiery anger in an instant.

"How dare you!" Dean spat.

"You are a coward." Drake repeated unperturbed. Jack gaped at him in disgust.

"We want their support. Not their hate!" He hissed. His eyes shot warnings at Drake not to continue. Drake completely ignored Jack.

"How dare you come into my cabin and present such a foolish suicidal mission – for that is *exactly* what this is!" Dean exploded. "Then *you*-" He jabbed a finger in Drake's direction, "-accuse me of being a *coward*!" The Nordom leader nearly projected spittle upon repeating the insult.

Drake merely sighed, and Dean fumed. Jack was flustered speechless. This was definitely not the approach that he and Drake had discussed on the way there. At least, it wasn't the one that he had suggested. He had assumed Drake had agreed. He hadn't said anything to the contrary. Come to think of it, Drake hadn't said *anything*. Jack blew out a sigh of chagrin as he wiped his face in

frustration. This had better turn around quick if they were going to walk away with any help at all. Nordom Dean would have the rest of the leaders against them in a thrice if Drake didn't quit insulting him.

Drake sighed and sat forward. "I only assumed you were a coward because you were unwilling to assist innocent children in trouble."

Nordom Dean's eyes glared in suspicion at Drake. "You didn't mention any children. What are you talking about?"

"Children are kidnapped by those evil men to become the very guinea pigs we were." Drake explained slowly as if to a child.

"Yes...?" Dean failed to understand where Drake was going with this.

Drake huffed. "You're heartless toward children that you would not care to save them?" Drake looked on Nordom Dean with pity. "And if you were to recall, we were asking you – all of you, about two hundred of you Nordoms – to assist in the attack against the vile creatures in the compound. But, since you have no heart, Jack and I will report to the other leaders and request *their* assistance." Drake stood and motioned with his head that Jack should follow. Jack was frowning fiercely, but he stood up from the sofa without a word. "I'm sure the others will be readily willing to assist us in our endeavor to save future innocent children and the current inmates of that heinous place. Without you." Drake gave this speech at the door and looked pointedly at the Nordom-leader with his end remark.

Dean glared back with an air of stubborn indifference, both of his bony fists held tightly at his sides. Drake continued over his shoulder as he opened the door to leave. "In such a close community and so few leaders, I wouldn't think it would be too difficult for anyone to notice one of their esteemed leaders not participating in such a worthy cause." Drake said in a musing tone.

Nordom Dean's countenance fell as realization hit that he would be the laughing stock of the community. He would be seen as the coward that Drake said that he was. Dean was silent for a moment in agonizing contemplation over saving his image and helping in this plan of a mad-man's contriving. Just as Drake made to step over the threshold and leave Dean to his thoughts, the troubled man spoke.

"Wait."

Jack turned in surprise, but Drake made no sign that he had heard Dean save for ceasing to move out the door. Dean moved toward Jack and Drake. Not looking them in the eye, the Nordom-leader promised to be of service.

"I will help." He spoke haltingly. He grimaced after the words were spoken, but to be called a coward was the very worst hit that a man's ego couldn't withstand. For this, he set aside his fears temporarily. "I will do my part to bring down the vile people running the compound."

Jack grinned and burst forth in enthusiasm before Drake could ruin their good fortune and change the skinny man's mind. "That's great! Thank you so much, Nordom Dean." The Nordom barely managed to smile as he shook Jack's outstretched hand.

Drake now turned. "I knew you would." He said simply, smiling in a way that made Dean feel manipulated in some way.

With that both men left the discomfited Nordom alone with his thoughts. Jack refused to allow Drake to talk in the next two cabins. He really didn't want to have another showdown. He needn't have worried. The other Nordom leaders were more than willing to listen and play their part in the downfall of the compound. Nordom Max and his wife Nillie were the most adamant about doing what they could. After talking with Jack and Drake, they said that they had a renewed motivation to unite the Nordoms under this common cause – to reign in their careless behavior.

When the boys finished, they met the girls back at Jack and Drake's cabin as pre-discussed. They found that Gale and Stephanie were not able to scrounge much up in the way of useful supplies. They were going to have to do some shopping in the village. It was disappointing that they would have to postpone the trip to the mainland an extra day. The weather also was another postponing factor. The rain had begun in the late morning while the boys were out talking to the Nordom leaders and it wasn't showing signs of stopping.

"We couldn't find too much that would be useful. There really wasn't very much in the cabins journey-worthy." Stephanie moped.

"That's alright." Jack cajoled. "We'll get some things in the village before we leave. You girls can do the shopping while Drake and I secure a boat."

"How are we going to buy things without any money?" Gale asked skeptically.

"The Nordom-leaders gave us some." Drake said.

"Oh, awesome. Then the meeting went well?" Stephanie asked.

"It did. We've secured allies with the Nordoms. When we get back, they agreed to help us take down the compound and everyone on the island involved." Jack affirmed. The girls grinned happily at each other over the good news.

"That's great! We have a force to be reckoned with!" Gale said excitedly. "There's nobody that could mess with us once we take them on. They don't have a chance." Gale grinned wickedly. Stephanie and Jack raised their eyebrows in consternation at her bloodthirstiness. Drake, on the other hand, smiled just as wickedly, if not more so. Gale would finally get her revenge for so many years stolen from her! These people will soon be dealt with, so that they would never harm another person again.

"We should head off to the village to get that boat rented." Jack directed this statement to Drake.

Drake nodded. "Let's go. Grab that bag of supplies, and we'll be off." Jack grabbed the bag, and they left to make the trek to the village. When they arrived in the village thirty minutes later, Drake split off from the group to find a boat to rent while the others went in search of supplies. Jack gave Gale and Stephanie some money, but kept a little for himself. He went off on his own himself after stressing that the girls should stay together. Both girls went off together mumbling between themselves about the boys going off on their own and ordering them around. For all of their talk, though, they really were grateful to have each other.

The girls had been shopping for a few hours and accumulated quite enough to get them to the mainland, so they decided to look at some fun things for themselves. They had no intention of spending what little they had left on unnecessary items, but having never shopped before they decided to have a little fun and satisfy their curiosities while they waited for Drake and Jack to come get them.

They found a gift shop near the docks and were browsing away to their heart's content when Stephanie noticed Drake out a window. He was headed toward the village and was about to enter a shop when he hesitated and suddenly made a beeline for the shop that she and Gale were in.

"How odd..." She mumbled.

"Hmm?" Gale absently asked.

"I said, 'how odd'." Stephanie repeated.

"Why?" Gale said only paying attention a little. She was fascinated with a trinket she had just found. She was having a hard time pulling her attention away.

"Drake. He changed directions for no apparent reason."

"So?" Gale asked.

"So... It seemed as if he knew we were here and not in the other shop." Stephanie said.

Gale blushed. "Could be he did know." She answered nonchalantly, not looking at Stephanie.

Stephanie frowned. "How would he know?"

"Well, I guess, he really wouldn't know... *exactly*." Gale fumbled.

Stephanie's eyes narrowed. "Gale...? How could he know that we were not in the other shop?"

"Because..." Gale stalled.

"Because... What?" Stephanie prompted.

"Because, he can find me." Gale finally admitted haltingly. "Anywhere. He said."

"How on earth can he find you?! And so fast!" Stephanie exclaimed in wonder when she caught Drake lumbering in their direction through the shop doorway. "I thought you said that he didn't know we were in here?"

"He didn't." Gale shrugged.

"Then how did he know where to find us - *you*?" Stephanie demanded.

"He told me that he could find me anytime he wanted if he really wanted to." Gale huffed.

"When did he tell you that, and *how* would he do that?" Stephanie guffawed.

Gale scrunched her eyebrows together in thought. "He told me when we were headed to the Nordoms to find you and Jack. He said that he would have to activate a sort of an internal tracking system or something—" She shrugged.

"What?! He planted a tracking device in you?" Stephanie exclaimed.

"No, no, no!" Gale laughed.

"Then how does he do it?" Stephanie frowned.

"It's more... telepathic." Gale explained pleased with herself that she figured out how to adequately describe it. Or so she had thought her explanation was adequate.

“So, he *did* plant a tracking ‘device.’ He just did it with his MIND?!” Stephanie shrieked. Drake popped in right at this moment. Gale burst out laughing thinking his timing could not have been more perfect. Drake squinted in confusion and sighed through his nose before stepping toward them.

“The boat is about to leave. It’s a ferry. I bought tickets instead of renting our own boat. We should all get on board before we miss it.” He informed them. He ignored Gale trying to recover from her bout of laughter and continued speaking to Stephanie. “I’ll go find Jack. Please, meet us at the docks.” Stephanie glared after Drake as he went in search of Jack then looked questioningly down at Gale.

“I don’t know what’s so funny. I think he’s just a bit much, personally. I mean, why on earth would it cross his mind to track you?” Stephanie sniffed.

Gale wheezed and gasped in gulps of air as the laughter left her. “Stephanie. I thought – it – was funny – that he came – in – when he did. The timing was – *perfect*! As for his tracking me: I have no idea why he does anything he does. I’ve interrogated him again and again, and he doesn’t seem to give up much more about himself than the last time.”

“You don’t think that this ranks as ‘creeper status’ at all?” Stephanie nearly whined in frustration at her obviously naive friend.

“Ummm... well... Not really.” Gale smirked. “I think it just adds to the mystery that makes up the man.” Gale spun away with a giggle. “Come on! I don’t want to miss that boat!”

Stephanie stared after her in bewilderment. “Adds to the mystery?” Drake was definitely not the only odd one in the group, but still. Well, hopefully Drake just turns out to like Gale and is merely being protective... but, a tracking device? Isn’t that too protective? Stephanie huffed. What did she know? She did not think that she would ever figure Gale out, let alone Drake too. Stephanie hurried to catch up to Gale. She didn’t want to be left behind. They were off to defeat a very bad guy!

In no time at all, all four were boarded on the ship with all the gear that Jack and the girls had purchased for the journey. All of them explored the boat having never been on one before. Then they settled into getting comfortable for the four hour journey they were told was coming. Everyone hoped that no one got seasick as they glanced around “discreetly” at the others, but also worrying that maybe they might be, except Drake.

As the boat left port the four talked about what they would do when they made port again and how they would find this George Hornfield. When they made dock they did not want to waste time with planning that they could have done ahead of time.

Everyone was excited! They had a goal, and a plan was in the works. They had God, each other, and the Nordoms behind them. The compound was going down. Maybe not today it was not. But, soon, very soon, it was!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE NEXT MORNING the rain had ceased, and the day brought more good food and renewed motivation to get to work on locating where Dr. Yassiff was being held. John and Kellie trekked their way down the muddied path down to the village feeling hopeful. Along the way John would stop and speak with a local, and Kellie would marvel at his nonchalant manner in gleaning information.

Really, anyone listening in to John's conversations would have no idea what he was doing. To anyone who might have an interest in his motives would walk away assuming that John was merely having a casual conversation with the locals. He sounded just like the tourist he was. He asked for directions, commented on the weather, he asked when tourist season was and how fruitful was it. He asked if the tourists made any trouble while they were heard or if little happened to raise any eyebrows. He smoothly interrogated the people hoping that someone would unknowingly slip him a clue to where the laboratory that held Yassiff would be found. He just needed a general direction minimum.

As far as John and Kellie could deduce, most of the locals did not venture very deep into the woods farther in on the island. The villagers seemed to migrate closer to the shores where fishing and trade was more abundant. No one seemed to truly know what was hidden behind the trees. That no one seemed to care was the main issue. There was zero motivation for them to find out, so they did not.

John huffed after he had finished speaking to yet another man who knew nothing. This was getting a little monotonous hearing essentially the same answer from each person he spoke to. As far as the villagers were concerned there was nothing of importance deeper on the island. There were no animals worth hunting for food. There were no animals that needed hunting for safety. The wolves on the island were well fed that they didn't seem to pose a problem. No one lived back there as far as they knew, so there was no one to trade with. Bottom line, nothing ever came out of the trees worth paying attention to.

John was very near giving up on these people and just going into the woods to explore on his own. He would not take Kellie, of course, to which she would have a fit, but he had to know if he had made a mistake. Maybe Kellie's *far* was not on the island after all. The set-back would break Kellie's heart all over again. John would merely have one horrid migraine if that were the case. Said migraine was already brewing with the lack of information.

“Well, now what?” Kellie huffed sounding just as frustrated as John. As the day wore on it was getting hot. So much heat in addition to so much moisture in the air was turning the day so humid that Kellie could hardly bare it. Not to mention it was wreaking havoc on her hair.

“*Nå*, we take a break for lunch.” John sighed. “After we eat, I think we should jump on our only lead from yesterday, and look into those large shipments.”

“Sounds like a good plan. I am pretty hungry. All this walking around is building a huge appetite!” Kellie agreed heartily, then grimaced as she swatted at another mosquito.

John chuckled tiredly. “I thought you might be.”

“How are we going to check up on the shipments, though?” Kellie asked as they scanned the shops for a restaurant of some sort. They quickly found somewhere to eat and ordered something native to the island. John waited for their server to move away from their table before speaking.

“We are going over to the post office to ask some questions.”

Kellie stared back with eyelids lowered in skepticism. “I highly doubt they will answer our questions about someone else’s mail – legal matters, you know.”

“I have my ways.” John smirked.

Kellie’s eyebrows went up. “Oh, yeah?” She smiled in a way that said she did not believe him. “Like what?” She leaned back in her seat waiting for an answer and wished the eatery hut wasn’t open to the outside air. Mosquitoes were everywhere. The humidity wasn’t helping matters. Although the huts on the island seemed to have electricity, the villagers seemed to use it for everything but heating and air conditioning. All huts had fireplaces, and all the windows were only sealed with thick leather flaps that were tacked into the walls like at the inn. However, on hot days like today the windows’ flaps were left open.

John just glanced up at her from his drink with the same smirk on his face refusing to indulge her curiosity. Kellie sensed this, and her smile began to fade being replaced by an impatient frown. They both enjoyed their food heartily in silence. The flavor was good, and they both just wanted to take a load off for a few more minutes before they covered any more ground.

After they had had their fill and relaxed enough to let their food settle, John paid the bill, and Kellie followed him out of the restaurant. John led the way to the post office. Once they located it, John held them up at the door, and Kellie watched him in confusion as he dug through his duffel bag’s pockets and pulled out a small stack of cards and his wallet. After sifting through the stack of cards, John chose one and replaced a card in his wallet. When he had finished this task John put everything away and his wallet in his back pocket. Smiling at a bewildered Kellie, John ushered her inside.

An elderly gentleman in his seventies greeted John and Kellie as they entered. His eyes brightened as they walked in. John took this to be a positive sign. He strode up with purpose to the man behind the standard high countertop found in any American post office. The only difference separating this place from the ordinary establishments in the USA was the wooden hut’s log walls surrounding the three of them. Racks displayed various sizes of packaging, and postcards, and all kinds of post office goodies.

“Hello!” The man greeted. His name tag read ‘Tazza-Tom.’ “Might there be anything I can help you with?”

John smiled back. “*Ja*. I have some questions that need answering.” John dug into his back pocket for his wallet.

Tazza-Tom’s eyes lost some of their shine at John’s tone, but his smile remained. “Well, what questions might those be?”

John showed Tazza-Tom his ID. Tazza-Tom’s eyes widened, and he began to sputter his willingness to answer any question. “Thank you.” John said graciously. Kellie’s eyes widened at the realization of what had occurred and spun around to browse the racks of boxes and other shipping items on display. She did not want to jeopardize their quest for answers, but John was going to need a good talking to, she determined. John continued speaking to the postmaster. “I caught wind of some very large packages coming to the island. There seemed to be some inconsistencies with the paperwork on our end. I just need to get some things straightened out with you.”

“Sure! Sure!” Tazza-Tom bobbed his head with nervous enthusiasm. “Anything! Just ask. We’ll get this straightened out in no time!” His eyebrows lowered, and his chin rose in his determination to please John.

John smiled gratefully in return. “If you could pull up the paperwork for the last five or six large packages sent here from the mainland, I’d like to compare what you have to what I know should have come this way.” John pulled a couple of the emails out of his duffel making sure that the postmaster did not see what was really in his hand.

“Sure, Sure!” Tazza-Tom repeated and hustled over to his computer and tapped a few buttons, squinted at the screen for a few moments and rushed off to the back for the requested papers.

“What are you doing?!” Kellie hissed from her place at John’s elbow.

John shushed her. “*Stille*. You want to find your *far* or not?” That shushed her for good. Kellie still did not like the lawbreaking she was witnessing, but she sure wanted to find her dad and take him away from this island back home where he belonged. So, she remained quiet and tried to be deaf to anything else John did while they were in the post office. Kellie asked God for forgiveness for the wrong they were committing, and fidgeted around the racks while she waited impatiently for John to finish.

Soon John and Kellie were headed back to the inn armed with copies of the paperwork for the past six large packages shipped to the island. Kellie sighed in relief as John finally ushered her from the post office past a man was on his way in. Kellie noticed the man give them a double take and thought that odd. As they walked John interviewed more village folks on the way back to the island. Dark clouds threatened more rain, and Kellie prayed the rain would not come.

As they walked, Kellie couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something significant about that man that entered the post office after them. Who was he? It was odd that he would take interest in us. Did we look familiar? She wouldn’t think so. He was dressed like the other villagers in a long tunic of sorts with a pair of straight baggy slacks and leather shoes on his feet, and he carried a soft treated leather coat in case of rain. He seemed to belong here, and she and John definitely didn’t. Or, so she thought.

By the time they had returned to the inn, they had loads of useful information that tied her father to the island from eyewitness accounts from the people of the village in addition to the papers for the large shipments. After getting freshened up and meeting in John's room, they both set to work rehashing the information they had gathered from the villagers and began reading over the shipments' paperwork.

Kellie and John had strewn the pages from the post office all around them before the fireplace in John's room. Kellie sat cross-legged facing the fire, and John was stretched out on his side beside her on the wolf skin splayed before the hearth.

"Hey, look at this!" Kellie exclaimed. "It looks like many of these packages held chemicals that only licensed scientists should be able to get their hands on."

John leaned closer to Kellie, pointing to a line on the page that he was scouring. "These contained equipment of some sort. I'm trying to make out the descriptions for the equipment, but it seems to be encrypted."

"Looks like gibberish to me," said Kellie. She wrinkled her nose in confusion at a line further down on the page. "'XT19348: ox-4, comp-6-er, num-8-tic...' I mean, what does all this stand for?" She asked scooting closer and pointing to the line that she was reading from on his page. She looked at John's profile expectantly. Not knowing what she was doing she began studying the side of his face after a minute. Her face nearly came to rest on his shoulder as she waited for his answer.

John muttered his musings to himself seemingly unaware of what Kellie had said. When he had a clear idea, John looked up to tell Kellie what he thought and bumped noses with her.

John and Kellie startled. Kellie immediately straightened and stared into the fire before them clenching her hands together in her lap. Suddenly she was giddy with a strange excitement. John froze and blinked up at her. That was awkward. Embarrassment rose up both of their necks to tinge their cheeks with a ruddy hue.

John cleared his throat and looked away at the floor, the paper in his hands – anywhere but at Kellie. "*Uh. Beklager.*" John fumbled. Rustling his paper he tried to gather his thoughts again. "I, uh, I think that I figured out what some of these encryptions mean." John said slowly gaining his bearings.

Kellie sighed in relief. "Oh, good!" She smiled. "What did you figure out?"

"I think these here and these here," John pointed to lines on his paper as he talked, "are large sheets of metal. These and these have to be the nuts and bolts to piece them together. The one you read doesn't make a whole lot of sense even after decrypting it." John explained. Kellie nodded as she followed his finger across the page with squinted eyes. She looked on at a distance this time. One awkward moment was enough.

Kellie piped up. "The line I read - 'XT19348: ox-4, comp-6-er, num-8-tic...'? What is this decrypted?"

"I think it says, 'XT19348: Examination - 4 times, Compliance - 6 times - Erase, Number - 8 times - Ticed...'" John sighed. "It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but they have to be these words based on the rest of the encryptions. Their patterns seem to be part encryption, part abbreviated or shortened words." John continued. "What appeared as a part number at first seems to be a project or process number instead."

Kellie's eyes widened in shocked confusion. "What kind of a project could be described with those words?"

"Not a very good one when I'm pretty sure they're using those chemicals you mentioned on people." John said gravely.

"What?!" Kellie gasped.

John showed her a second page that listed the chemicals she had mentioned. At the bottom of the page, John pointed to a starred notation for Kellie to read.

"All dosages are separated for the consumption of a standard-sized human male, per request." Kellie sat back and slapped a hand over her mouth. "What are they doing to them? How many?"

"*Jeg vet ikke,*" John said soberly, "but this shipment was for two hundred. There are three other shipment forms." Kellie dropped her hands and stared in disbelief. They remained in silence as they devoured the rest of the information from the papers before them.

John was able to discover from the postmaster that the same man almost always came in to sign for the paperwork and another helped carry it out behind the post office and take it back towards the trees.

They had a lead! The laboratory is most definitely hidden in those trees along with Kellie's *far*. Kellie was so giddy to be so close to her father that she hardly could contain it. John tried to keep her calm. They couldn't very well go nab him now.

Tomorrow John would dress as a villager and scout out the woods and the laboratory. He planned to go without Kellie even though he was sure she would manage to tag along. John nearly had the confidence he needed to storm the place as it was. To play it safe however, he needed to be sure everything was at the ready. When they could break Kellie's *far* out of the lab, they would need to have a clean getaway at the ready. At long last Kellie's *far* would be saved.

Kellie smiled at John.

"*Hva?*" He asked.

"Thank you!" She said simply.

"For what?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"For helping me find my father. I just cannot wait to see my mother's face when we walk through the door all together for the first time in almost twenty years!"

"*Vi vill,* don't thank me yet." John said slowly a little flustered. "We haven't saved him, yet."

"No." Kellie still smiled. "But, we will. I trust you to help me. Plus, we have God on our side." Kellie said with such confidence that John believed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KELLIE WOKE early the next morning with a start and a gasp. Springing upright she braced herself on one hand while covering her tearstained face with the other. Kellie tried to stifle her sobbing. It was only a nightmare. It was only a nightmare. It was *only* a nightmare! She repeated this mantra to herself over and over again. If only it wasn't so real...

Sighing on her last sob, Kellie swung her legs from her bed at the inn and walked to stand before the hearth digging her toes into the warm fur of the wolf skin beneath her feet. Her mouth moved as she prayed silently for her heart to settle and that God would carry her fears far away. With her arms about herself in an attempt to quiet her nerves, she thought over the nightmare and wondered at it.

In her slumber Kellie had been walking in the woods behind the inn at twilight. All was tinted by an eerie shade of grey in the dim light. She was just walking and occasionally she would shiver. Once it would be because she was chilly, and another time she would shiver because of the eerie feeling she had about the woods. In the dream she knew not what her destination was. She didn't even know why she was in the woods. John was not with her. She had a sense in the dream that John was not even on the island. Kellie was all alone. She wandered amongst the trees and bushes searching, searching for – she knew not what.

Then all of the sudden she felt danger. She knew without a doubt that danger was upon her, and she ran. Dark, tall shadows lurked and jumped between the trees ever gathering closer. Any moment she would be overcome. Kellie's breathing quickened as she recalled the terror that had overwhelmed her in the dream. Just as she was sure that she would be smothered by her fear and the ever closer shadows, she fell.

Kellie had not been paying any attention to her surroundings in the attempt to keep track of the spontaneous shadows leaping from all directions. Lifting her face from the scratchy leaves and twigs beneath her, Kellie came face to face with a gravesite. A rugged cross made of large sawn branches stood tottering from the ground. Leaves surrounded the marker all around, and it was obvious to Kellie that it had been there a great many years. A large piece of bark was hung on the cross by a string. It fluttered in the wind. Kellie noticed some writing on the smoother side of the bark.

With a new fear gripping her heart and lungs, Kellie, wheezing from terror and exertion, reached a hand toward the cross and turned over the piece of bark. Kellie stopped breathing. The bark read, "Dr. Mark Yassiff's Final Resting Place." Kellie choked and scrambled back away from the cross only

to be overcome by the shadows. In an instant all was black, and she had been suffocated by the darkness. That was when Kellie had woken up.

Kellie shuddered. She choked on a sob and went over to the table and chair in the room. The kind landlady had placed a clay pitcher and cup full of water upon it. Kellie splashed some water into the cup and swallowed. She closed her eyes but immediately popped them open wide. The nightmare still haunted her behind her eyelids. With a grimace she began to pray aloud.

“Heavenly Father, please! Please, steady my heart beats. Please, remove my fears. Why did I have this awful nightmare? I beg You that this is not a sign that my father is unable to be saved or—” Kellie broke off in a gasp and a shudder. “Or, that he might be *dead*.” She whispered haltingly. Taking a deep and steadying breath Kellie began again. “Heavenly Father, give John the clarity and wisdom to bring my father home to my mother safely. Oh! and forgive me for my thoughtlessness for Hannah! Poor, poor Hannah! Lord, comfort her!”

Kellie blinked away the tears already streaming down her face. She slowly moved toward the window and pulled a tack from the wall releasing a portion of the thick leather covering. Peeking out into the night she sighed as the soft chilly breeze caressed her face and dried her tears. “Please let them both be safe.” She whispered into the wind.

Kellie soon left the window and snuggled into one of the down-stuffed chairs by the dark hearth wrapped in the heavy blanket that had lain on the end of her bed. She tried hard not to fall asleep and dream, but she instead prayed for anyone that came to mind. Soon she dozed off and fell asleep and wonderfully dreamt of nothing.

Kellie woke to her only window rolled open and delicious smelling food steaming while it sat upon her table. She smiled. The service here was truly fabulous. Stretching from her cozy spot in the chair, Kellie moved over to the table and said grace over her food before digging in. Her eventful night sure had created an appetite in her.

With her wonderful breakfast done away with, Kellie went about becoming presentable. Not having a mirror in the room she did the best that she could. Kellie was continually marveling at how primitive this village was. The modern conveniences that they had and the ones that they did without - there just was not rhyme nor reason for which they used and which they didn't.

Just as she was finishing her toilet, Kellie's conscience pricked her about the man that she had noticed at the post office in the village. She remembered now how strangely he had looked at them when he had entered just as they were leaving. He made such a concerted effort to slip in as inconspicuously as possible and refrained from saying a word at all to them. There was something about that man and the way that he had studied her and John. She realized that in their excitement over the leads they had discovered yesterday, Kellie had completely forgotten to say anything to John about him.

Well, that could be remedied quickly. With a small determined jut to her chin, Kellie marched from her room across the hall and knocked rather forcefully on John's door. She waited. Nothing. Not a sound from within. Kellie's brow puckered. That was odd. John didn't mention that he was going out this morning when he discussed his plans with her last night. She pouted. She might not be

anyone of consequence in his life, but it was only polite to keep your partner informed at all times what he or she were doing when on a mission together... Right?

Kellie knocked again. He had to be there. After waiting a few more minutes, Kellie was about to bang on the stupid, silent door again when the landlady approached from down the hall.

"Hello, deary! Sleep well?" She asked matronly. The woman really made Kellie miss her mother more than ever before in her life.

"Yes, thank you." Kellie smiled warmly at the little round woman.

The landlady was about to pass on but spoke when Kellie raised her arm to begin banging on the door again. "Deary, he's not in there."

"He's not?" Kellie frowned. "Where is he?"

"I'm sure, I don't know. He only left in the wee hours of the morn and said to tell you, if you were to ask, that he would be back soon. You oughtn't to worry. Your man there looks to be able to care for himself. I'm sure he's only left to get you something to tweak your fancy." She chuckled in delight. "He cares an awful lot for you, that he does!"

Confused more now than ever, Kellie struggled to pull a thought from her muddled brain. "Care for me?" She asked lamely.

"Why, of *course*, he does!" Mia-Maze looked wryly at Kellie. "A whole bunch, he does." She winked, and Kellie giggled in spite of herself. Mia-Maze was a dear. "I'm surprised you wouldn't know it."

"A whole bunch, huh?" She repeated amused. Kellie's smile slipped as she glanced back at John's door. "When will he be back?"

Mia-Maze's brow scrunched up in thought. "Oh... I shouldn't think too much longer now." She brightened. "But, come along, now!" The landlady exclaimed cheerily. "I said he's not one to be worried about. Let's get you busy, so that you won't put worry wrinkles on your pretty brow." Mia-Maze shuffled Kellie along in the direction of the kitchen. "How does raspberry pie sound? You'll help me make it, and we'll sit down to a slice." Mia-Maze chattered happily all the way, not noticing the pucker still remained on Kellie's brow.



As the hours wore on, the worry puckering Kellie's brow turned to indignation. The stupid man had gone without her. He had left to scout out the laboratory in the woods. He knew that she wanted to come, and he had deliberately left without telling her. Kellie had ruined three crusts in her anger before Mia-Maze gave her a different task.

Three hours after Kellie had been knocking on his door did the sneaky devil come back to the inn. By this time Kellie was positively foaming at the mouth. The moment Kellie heard the bell above the entry of the inn, she dropped what she was doing and barged from the kitchen to find John frozen just over the threshold. He had the appearance of one caught red handed. He quickly

schooled his features and tried to smile at Kellie, but she would have none of it. She was so mad her blood boiled in her veins and raced through her causing her limbs to shake.

John took in the sight of her. Kellie was covered in flour and some kind of red sticky substance splotched her shirt. Wisps of hair sprung from her ponytail in all directions. Her eyes glared daggers and knives and spears at him; she was so angry. John had expected to come back and find her upset when she figured it out, but this... this was something else altogether. He had not expected Kellie to be *this* upset.

"You!" Kellie spat from her place just outside of the kitchen doorway. She stepped toward him. "You!" She repeated, louder this time.

"Me." John answered. Kellie's eyes blazed. John's eyes widened. Wrong move. For some reason he was sweating and trying very hard not to laugh both at the same time. He'd never been in such a confused state of mind. With everything in him John refrained from laughing. He knew without a doubt that would be the worst thing he could do right now.

"You horrid-!" She faltered. "You terrible-! You sneaky little person! You stinking, smelly, heinous man! No!" She burst. "You are not a man!" Her nose flared with each breath. "You are something else altogether." She held up her hand, still clenching the other in a fist. John watched that one carefully. He didn't want to be nursing a sore jaw later. "I don't know what you are! How could you?! You vile, heinous, idiotic, horrid -"

"You said that one." John mumbled then winced. *Idiot*. He thought instantly.

"OOHH!" Kellie screamed and made as if to hit him but pulled back just in the nick of time. John flinched. "You-! You-!" She spat unable to finish. Seething Kellie walked small circles before him still spitting insults under her breath. When she happened to glance up at him, John would flinch, and her anger would blaze anew. Finally, Kellie ran out of insults and stomped off at a clipped pace down the hall toward her room.

John released the breath he didn't know that he was holding and sagged. All of his muscles slowly relaxed. He had never been so uncomfortable or sorry of anything in his life. He frowned at the impact Kellie's tantrum had made on him.

He glanced up to find the landlady shaking her head disapprovingly at him. His eyebrows rose. *Her too?* He snickered, then chuckled, and in seconds was holding his sides as he howled like a lunatic in the entry of the village inn. The landlady shook her head with her mouth agape in shock. *Surely*, she thought, *something vital in his mental box has just broken*. She debated on searching out her husband in case the strange man would turn feral. She needn't have worried. John came to his senses presently. He finished laughing with a gasp and grimace.

Straightening his posture, John sighed. Oh, Kellie. It was for her own safety. Did she not see that? She was quite the spitfire. He tucked that information away with a fleeting grin.

"You ought to go speak to her." Mia-Maze spoke up at last. Her tone was anything but friendly at the moment. John looked quizzingly in her direction. Mia-Maze stretched her small frame as tall and commanding as she could for one of such small stature. "You ought to go to her." She repeated. "You ought to explain why you were so foolish." She scowled up at him. "She ruined

three crusts because of you.” She humphed and tottered back into the kitchen. John gaped after her. *He was foolish?* Why that little... John growled in frustration and stalked off after Kellie. He was going to deal with this right now!

John found Kellie stalking angrily in her room. She had tried to pray and get over it. But, she was hurt and that always made things all the harder to forgive and forget. She knew she was being a little petty, but that didn’t make it any easier either. At the sound of John’s beefy fist pounding on her door. Kellie glowered at him through the closed door. She took a step in its direction to give him another piece of her mind when she stopped and sighed. Flexing her fingers trying to release her anger, she quickly prayed for help.

Flinging the door open wide, Kellie greeted John with an exaggerated grin. “John! There you are. We really ought to get on with our plans for the day.” She waved her arm indicating that he should enter.

John’s frown deepened. He stared at her wary of Kellie’s actions. This was very odd. She looked rather crazed with her hair still sticking out all over her head, and she still wore her sticky shirt. With a joker sized grin plastered on her face, John was instantly on the defensive. John waited for the strange woman to move away from the door before he made to enter the room. John first glanced all around the entrance to be sure there wasn’t a trap waiting for him. All the while he never lost sight of the woman before him in his peripheral. Cautiously he entered Kellie’s room pushing the door flush with the wall. Just in case Kellie got it into her head to murder him, he wanted witnesses.

Kellie eyed his strange behavior causing her smile to falter. She frowned up at the man trying to understand his cautious movements. She looked around the room. Should she be worried? “What’s the matter?” Kellie took a cautious stance of her own. “Is someone after us?” She thought of the strange man at the post office. “Does someone know what we’re up to?!” Her eyes were no longer angry but frightened in the blink of an eye. John’s eyes blinked incredulous at the transformation in her.

“Kellie, are you ok?” He reached a hand out to her in a placating gesture.

“Yes...?” Kellie answered with a frown. “Are *you* alright?” She asked.

“*Hva?*” John asked caught off guard.

“Are you alright?” Kellie repeated.

John stared.

“What are you talking about?” He asked exasperated. “You’re the one yelling at me, then grinning at me like a crazy person, and just now you were frightened for some reason - all of this in less than ten minutes! And now *you’re* asking *me* if I’m ok?” John sputtered.

Kellie wrinkled her brow in confusion. “Yes.” She said without hesitation. “You creeped into my room as if you were afraid of setting off a bomb.” She raised her brows in question.

John could not believe this woman. “*Ja!* That bomb was you!” He barked.

Kellie looked taken aback. “Me?!”

John sputtered and threw up his hands in defeat. "Forget it!" He exhaled and looked at her. "We're losing daylight. If we're going to save your *far* today, then we should get moving."

Kellie's eyes brightened. "Yes, let's!" With that she flounced on over to a stuffed chair and plopped down on it folding her hands in her lap and looked up at John expectantly. John rolled his eyes at her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“THAT STINKING JOHN!” Kellie grumbled angrily under her breath. “He *would* find a way to leave me out of the fun.” Kellie huffed as her conscience pricked her. “Oh, I know that he had good reasons why I shouldn’t go with him. But still!” She scowled. Just because she tended to get excited and might distract John or bring attention to themselves that was not reason enough to leave her behind. Neither was it a good enough reason to leave her behind because she might act rashly when she saw her father. *I mean, come on!* They were both *might’s* anyway! There was no guarantee.

Kellie went back to practicing turning on the boat just like John had taught her. All of their things were packed away in the boat and ready to hightail it off the island the second John came with her father.

After the episode earlier with John, they discussed their plans which really meant that John told Kellie what they were going to do. She would man the boat and wait after loading it with their things, and John would go rescue her father – by himself. Kellie rolled her eyes. Patience really wasn’t her thing. Especially, when something so momentous was happening in her life, and she wasn’t even a part of it! “Curse John.” She growled, just a little bitter. She sighed. Ok, maybe a lot bitter. Seeing that she could run this boat in her sleep and having nothing else to do, Kellie got down to praying with all that she was worth that God would keep John and her father safe. She also prayed that they really would be sailing off this island and on the way home tonight.



The light was fading fast and John really wanted to make it back to the compound before it was completely dark in the woods. He hustled as fast and as silently as he could. John haltingly prayed that Kellie wouldn’t be foolish – that she would stay on the boat and wait for him and her *far* to come to her.

John breathed deep through his nose and exhaled long through his mouth in an effort to keep moving quickly through the trees. Why did there have to be so many of them? Wandering through the woods this morning with no real deadline made the compound seem much closer than it was. John periodically checked his compass to be sure that he stayed on a straight course.

What he had originally thought was a simple laboratory was definitely not. Armed guards made their rounds around the property keeping an eye out for intruders. They were very well trained. When a shift change happened while he was scouting out the place, John noticed that the guards

were very careful not to leave any station unmanned until the replacement guard came to relieve them.

Breaking into the compound was going to take longer than he had thought. Whoever was running this compound knew what he was doing. Because of so many guards and the skill it would take to sneak in and snatch Kellie's *far*, John thought it safer for everyone that she stay on the boat. Hopefully she'll get over her issue with his choice. Eventually the *pike* needed to figure out how to trust.

Finally, John came upon the compound and halted in the cover of the ring of trees surrounding the eight foot tall barbed-wire fences standing between him and the compound. In the hours that he had cased this place earlier that although there seemed to not be a weak spot in the guards' surveillance, one side of the massive building before him had the fewest guards on duty. That's where John headed, staying within the cover of the woods.

Once he had come upon the north corner of the widest side of the building, John waited and watched. Just on the other side of the corner was a door. A guard would pass this door and round the corner. He would stop and scan the area and salute to an identical guard who rounded the other corner and do the same as the first. The salute seemed to John that they were agreeing that all was well. *Mann*, their job had to be monotonous. John would bet that they were paid well to do this. Someone was going to great pains to be sure that this operation was staying on the down low.

John watched the men round their corners and salute at each other a few more times before, just as he suspected would happen, a shift change was signaled by way of three flashes of a great light situated on the top of a small shack of a building to the side of the great building. There were two such buildings. This one signaled to the north side and back of the building. The other signaled to the front and south sides of the building.

John having situated himself behind the signal building in the trees took the shift change as his opportunity to break through the wire fencing. Once this was done, he peered around the small shack to observe the men changing shifts. The man to replace the guard on the back north corner hadn't come yet. John made sure that there wasn't a physical man manning the signal building inside. Just as he thought. John smirked as he peered in through a window low in the wall. A massive computer system manned the building, and someone in the compound manned the light from inside. *How convenient*, John thought.

John glanced around the building once more and noticed that the replacement guard had arrived and met the former guard behind what appeared to be an outhouse about thirty yards away from the door John wanted to enter. They were exchanging words. Now or never.

John scowled in concentration as he hustled low over to the wall after making sure that the other guard wasn't coming around the south corner to salute the new replacement. John flattened himself to the wall and peeked around the corner to be sure the two guards were still talking behind the outhouse. They were. Thank goodness for slackers!

John slid quickly around the corner to stand before the door with his lock-picking tool in hand. Glancing at the men once more he reached for the lock – that wasn't there. Frowning, John

whipped his head back around and scanned the bare door. There wasn't a doorknob, bar handle, nada. The door was bare.

Starting to sweat and glancing back at the two men, John glanced back at the door and noticed a keypad mounted on the wall next to the door. John quickly pulled his *other* lock-picking device from his back pocket and quickly plugged it into the base of the keypad. Just as John turned it on his ears picked up on the men's tones over by the outhouse. They sounded like their conversation was coming to an end. Now, John was really sweating.

John begged the device in his hand to work faster. The guard would be taking his post any second and John's handheld had only cracked three of the ten digit code. Glancing worriedly over at the men again, he noticed one beginning to turn around. John's jaw clenched in panic, and he peered around the corner. The other south-side guard was just going back around the corner. Letting the device hang from the cord, John sprinted back over to the small signal shack and crouched low. From there he waited and watched as the guard, at last, began his rounds.

John held his breath as the guard passed his dangling device three times as his mind obviously wasn't on his job. John sharply inhaled as on the fourth pass the guard halted and finally looked at the device hanging on the keypad. It must have beeped signaling that it had finished. John tensed his muscles to sprint at the guard and jumped from his place silently when he saw that the coast was clear. John pounced on the guard. Before he even knew John was there, John had a chokehold on the guard and a hand over his mouth. The guard went down with hardly a struggle. Breathing deeply from the adrenaline rushing through his veins and the quick sprint John plucked his device from the keypad and pushed his way inside the compound through the door.

John halted just inside the door to get his bearings. Having never been here before, and he doubted that maps of the grounds were posted, he would have to take this relatively slow. John's eyes scanned the room that he had slid into. It appeared to be the workers' lunch room of sorts. A kitchenette graced the far wall on his left. The kitchenette consisted of a fridge, sink, small counter space, and a microwave. There were metal tables and benches evenly spaced about the room. The three other walls in the room were bare and glaringly white. There was only one door out of this room.

John made his way passed the tables and benches over to the door directly across from the one he had just come through. Since there wasn't a lock of any kind nor was there a window to peep through, John pushed it open slowly inch by inch until he could see without. A long, empty hallway greeted him.

John slipped out of the lunchroom into the empty hallway and let the door fall closed behind him. John walked quickly to the end of the hall where another door greeted him. Again, there was no lock nor window on this door either. John slowly pushed this door open as well. Peeping inside, John found that he must have stumbled upon the control room of the compound. Short cubicles were scattered around the room with desktops all alight with one program or another. Only three men in long white coats could be seen. One was seated at a desk and the others stood discussing something on the screen of a different monitor.

John crouched low and slipped inside making sure the door shut silently behind him. Staying as close to the ground as his tall frame would allow, John hid within a cubicle and tried to stay hidden

as he decided on the best course to leave this room. Dr. Yassiff wasn't one of the three men if Kellie's picture was any indication.

Kellie carried her father's picture with her always in a locket on a bracelet her mother had given her for her thirteenth birthday. It was this miniature that John referenced now. The two men talking stopped abruptly. John's ears strained to hear what was happening, and his breathing became so shallow that he nearly stopped breathing at all. His eyes were wide as he intently watched the men's shadows.

"Did you see the door close, Chuck?" One man asked. Both standing shadows made motions as if turning.

"No." The shadow that must be Chuck shrugged with his answer.

"No one entered the room?" The first man asked suspiciously. John held his breath.

"I didn't see anybody, Dale." Chuck answered again. The man at his desk must be ignoring the others or have ear buds in his ears. "I didn't see anybody. There's only us three in here." Chuck reassured the first man, Dale. Chuck's shadow's arm gestured in a wide arch proving his point. There were a few moments of silence as if the doubtful one in the room were listening just in case.

Finally, Dale began to grumble about working too many long hours this week and hearing things. John exhaled slowly and slithered passed desks towards where he thought the other door out was. He was even more careful this time exiting, so that it wasn't noticed.

John stayed low and slid in behind a filing cabinet that had been set near the door to this new room. John took slow breaths as he assessed his surroundings. He seemed to be in an office, but what resembled a chemistry lab surrounded the only desk.

Cabinets lined three walls with tall counter tops beneath them. Filing cabinets lined the wall John was currently leaning against. The desk was situated in the center of the room and the three long, also tall, counters equipped with storage drawers surrounded the desk in the middle. The counters were heavy laden with chemistry lab equipment. There was a single man in the room, and he was bent over his work at the desk. John squinted at him. The man seemed familiar. He wore a white coat like the others in the room John had just exited. Without realizing what he was doing, John began to lean forward trying to get a better look at the man. The man suddenly looked up into John's eyes.

"Dr. Yassiff!" John exclaimed.

The man in question frowned but otherwise didn't move. "Yes? Who are you?"

"I'm John. I'm with your daughter." John quickly explained standing and walking over to stand before the desk and Kellie's *far*. "I'm here to get you out of here. But, we have to move quickly!"

Dr. Yassiff must have stopped listening early on because he just blinked up at John from his seat. "My daughter, you say?" He asked slowly.

"*Ja!*" John exclaimed. "*Nå*, come on. We need to get moving!"

"Go? No one leaves here." Dr. Yassiff faltered even as he stood.

John came around the desk and took hold of Dr. Yassiff's arm and made for the door he had entered the lab through. Dr. Yassiff suddenly halted as if waking up and realizing what was happening.

"Wait!"

John scowled. "We haven't much time, Sir."

"No, wait." Dr. Yassiff repeated. "You can't go out there like that." He was shaking his head at John's attempt at explaining that he had just come from there dressed just as he was. The doctor walked over to a filing cabinet and produced a pair of light blue scrubs that matched what the inmates wore in the compound. "Here, put these over your clothes. They might be a bit snug." John did as he said. "Now, if you don't mind, let me lead." John frowned. "I have free reign here. I can get us out much faster than if I were to sneak behind you. The only thing I need to know is where is the exit in the fencing you undoubtedly made." John struggled not to gape at the sudden surge of energy that seemed to be seeping into the scientist's bones as he talked. John explained how he had gotten in, and they were off.

"Hang your head and stare as blankly as you can at the floor, and let me lead you out. Let me do the talking." Dr. Yassiff spoke quickly as he reached to push the door open. John nodded and did as he was told. The doctor led the both of them back into the room full of cubicles, and the two men still talking looked up at them.

"What's this?" Chuck asked.

"Another subject for training." Dr. Yassiff sighed tiredly as he pushed John forward toward the door leading out to the hall. "He passed his assessment tests." John flicked his eyes at the doctor without moving his head at all. The man could act! Doing his best not to smirk, John focused on not gaining any unnecessary attention.

"I'd say he has!" Chuck answered. He elbowed Dale next to him who had thought he heard John's earlier entry to the room. "Look at this guy's arms. He's in great condition. I think the boss will put him to work STAT!" Chuck chuckled, and Dale gave John a glance before getting back to work with a frown that gave John the impression Dale had a headache. The third man in the room sitting at his desk really did have ear buds in his ears and was working away at his computer without glancing up at John and the doctor's exit.

Soon Mark Yassiff had led John from the room into the empty hall beyond and then they both moved quickly into the workers' lunchroom. This is where things got tricky. Either the man John had put unconscious was discovered or not – that would determine whether they had a smooth get away or not. John felt they had taken long enough that the guard would be found, but since the door to the outside was too thick to hear without and didn't have a window – he couldn't be sure.

There was only one way to find out. John pulled his device out from his pocket again and was going to plug it into the keypad again when Mark put a hand on his arm to stop him. John turned and looked at him. Mark handed him his keycard without a word. John smiled his thanks and swiped it putting his device away.

With a deep breath in, John pulled the door open slowly. He peeped out and the guard was gone. He had expected that, but where was the ambush that should be waiting? John and Mark exited the building, with no sign of anyone waiting for them, and cautiously rushed for the opening John had made in the barbed fencing.

Once they were through they made a mad dash for the trees not bothering to wait to see if anyone would come after them. John pulled his compass out of his pocket to keep them moving in the right direction. Mark struggled from his white coat and left it in their dust. John glanced at him questioningly.

"I'll be more easily spotted with it on." Mark shrugged. John kept pace with him admiring the man's competence. After about a hundred yards, John and Mark slowed a little as they heard shouts and angry dogs scouring the woods. They looked at each other with worried frowns. John's face soon broke into a grin, and he nearly shouted in laughter. The guards had thought someone had broken *out* not *in*! Praise be to God!

Mark looked questioningly at John's snort. John just shook his head and said one word, "Later."

Mark and John did well to keep from being sighted by the guards. Because it was fully dark and late at night by this time, the guards' flashlights made it easy to stay clear and make a wide arch around them. John and Mark finally came out of the woods behind the village inn about an hour after they had entered.

Walking at a clipped pace, adrenaline kept them moving and wary of their surroundings. Finally, they were through the village and at the docks. Kellie was ready to feed John a piece of her mind from worry and being left behind when he boarded the boat, but all thoughts escaped her at the sight of her father.

Kellie looked shyly at her father, and he at her for a few seconds before John pulled her attention away. "Kellie!" He said her name crossly as he pulled the docking ropes into the boat. "Drive!" He commanded.

Kellie startled. "Oh! Right!" She turned and started the boat, and they shot from the dock like a pro drove it. She was so proud of herself that she glanced at John for affirmation when the boat jerked, and they all nearly lost their balance.

"Kellie!" John growled. "Here." He shoved her out of the way toward her *far* and took over driving the boat speedily away from the island and toward the mainland.

"Hi." Kellie spoke shyly to the large shadow that was her father.

"Hello." He responded just as shyly. Kellie beamed in delight. Her father was safe at last, and they would be all together with her mother at home for the first time in such a long time. God is so good to finally answer their prayers!



Four hours later John, Kellie, and her father docked on the mainland and were just getting out of the boat when Kellie exclaimed, "Hannah!" It was too dark for either of the men to see that her face had gone pale.

"How could I have forgotten about her?!" She moaned in agony.

"I can see how." John said unfeelingly. "You just got your *far* back. That's kind of a big deal." He shrugged in the darkness.

"John! I told you about her!" Kellie nearly shouted indignantly. "Did you even look for her?" She asked accusingly. Her guilt was nearly overwhelming. "We have to go back." Kellie started to get back into the boat.

John tried to stop her. He grabbed her arm, but she just shook it off. "Kellie—" Mark interrupted him.

"Kellie. It's too late." Kellie froze when she heard this.

"No!" Kellie breathed aghast. "She can't be—" But, she couldn't finish.

"No, Kellie, she isn't dead." Mark sighed on a half chuckle.

Kellie sagged in relief. "Oh, good! Well then, we must go after her." Kellie continued to climb back into the boat.

"Kellie Yassiff, you get out of that boat and listen!" Mark ordered. Kellie gaped at her father. What an odd sensation to be talked to in that manner as an adult, and by the father that had been estranged to her for so long! Kellie meekly climbed back out of the boat and stood before her father as a child ready to repent. "Are you ready to listen?" Her father asked patiently. Kellie nodded forgetting that it was too dark to see. "Kellie?" Mark asked her again.

"Yes." She whispered.

"Hannah has been injected, Kellie. She cannot come yet. She was too deep into the compound to be saved at the time. But, don't worry; John and I think we have the beginnings of a plan to save all of them."

"Injected?" Kellie asked softly so very confused. "What do you mean?"

"Not now, Kellie." Mark said gently. "I'll explain on the way back home to your mother."

"Mother!" Kellie breathed excitedly. "Oh, yes! Mother will be so excited to see you!" Kellie was bouncing along in joy as if she were a child again. John chuckled happily at her joy. Then, he chuckled in irony. He really was going to be saving the world by the time this was all said and done.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“SORRY, BUDDY, but you’re on your own now.” Matthew Truitt, Paradise Orphanage’s Head Director said on a sigh. “There’s no more that we can do for you here. Good luck.” The man added as he ushered Thane to the door and practically shoved him out. Thane had his duffel strapped to his back with wide eyes and slumped shoulders.

Thane Jett is 18; therefore, he is too old to keep on in the state orphanage. He had been warned a few months ago this moment was coming. He immediately went after a job and searching for new living arrangements. He was able to secure a job, but a new place to stay was proving to be much more difficult than expected. Although Thane had enough for a down payment thanks to a couple of months of putting money away with no bills, he did not have a credit score. Since he did not have a credit score, he was ineligible for an apartment anywhere in the area. *Frustrating* does not even begin to describe the situation.

Thane is a tall, built young man with jet black hair and brown eyes. His eyes are so dark they often are mistaken for black at first glance. He didn’t like shaving, so he often had a short beard and mustache framing his mouth. Thane – being the cliché tall, dark, and handsome – often got looks and compliments from girls. His ego did not mind at all.

“Well, alrighty then...” Thane huffed a frustrated sigh and looked around. That definitely came way too fast. “At least I’ve got a job.” He attempted to see the bright side, but Johnny Raincloud fell over him again. “But no one will take the money.” He grumped. Thane shrugged his duffel strap to a more comfortable spot. “I should go to the library and search for people renting rooms in their houses. That would be more profitable than trying to get an apartment without a credit score.” He muttered.

It really was the dumbest thing he had learned. He had cash right there with him every time he had tried to secure an apartment. The moment the manager found out he did not have a credit score Thane’s money had been returned to him. Thane would have thought the green paper would have spoken louder than a stupid credit score.

The problem is that Thane refused to build one. Thane did not want any debt. Ever. He did not even want temporary debt, which is how he viewed using a credit card. Using a credit card to him was racking up debt, so others could see how fast you could pay it off. Apparently it was suspicious to have cash on hand. Thane snorted.

Refusing to snivel any longer about his situation, Thane strapped his duffel to his motorcycle that he had scrimped and saved for and headed to the library. There he spent an hour compiling a list of vacancies in various people's homes. After printing off the list of addresses, he headed off to the first one listed.

Considering what part of town the house was in, it was exactly what Thane had expected. Somebody should have stamped *Condemned!* on this property and scheduled a bulldozer years ago. The place was barely hanging on. The house was a dismal grey, even in the bright sunlight. One could not see in any of the windows, the door was literally crooked on two hinges, and no amount of bravery could entice a man to attempt to mount the raised porch steps.

Jaw dropped and eyebrows scrunched in disgust, Thane said, "Nuh-uh!" revved his motorcycle engine and kept moving. Many houses later and nearly fainting from hunger, Thane stopped for lunch.

Thane sighed as he scooted into his booth at Applebee's shoving his duffel in first. He scowled at his menu in concentration. He went with steak, mashed potatoes, and sautéed veggies, and water. Was there anything else on the menu worth looking at? Thane thanked his waitress after she took his order and went back to brooding about his morning. Such a big change in his life. Little did he know just how much bigger of a change that was coming.

"Excuse me." Thane looked up at the man hovering over his table. "Might I have a word with you?" Thane looked back in surprise then nodded to the man.

"Sure." Thane answered. The man was fit and in his late forties. His hair was black with graying sideburns. His eyes held steel and spoke of all he had seen and done.

"I could not help but notice that you seem to be on a trip of some sort?" The man asked cordially as he sat down across from Thane.

"Not really... May I ask who you are?" Thane asked. The man chuckled.

"Excuse my manners. George Hornfield, and you are?" He smiled expectantly holding out his hand to Thane.

"Thane Jett." Thane answered and shook his hand. "What can I do for you, sir?"

One corner of George's mouth lifted in an amused smirk. "This will be a bit of an odd request... But, first, where are you headed?"

"I'm not really sure yet actually." Thane answered truthfully. He glanced down at the table before meeting George in the eye again. "I'm currently looking for new living arrangements. My old one has been terminated."

"Perfect! Just the answer I was hoping for." George said jovially. Thane frowned in bewilderment. "I may have just the thing for you if you don't mind doing me a favor?" George grinned expectantly. Just then Thane's food arrived.

"What kind of favor?" Thane asked warily when the waitress went away.

George radiated pleasure at Thane's interest. He clapped his hands rubbing them together all the while grinning with enthusiasm. George slid a small navy blue leather bound journal across the table. Thane eyed George while picking up the book.

"This looks like some kind of chemistry research." Thane observed after he flipped through some of the pages.

"That is what it is exactly. I've been working on a vaccination for years. It seems to be ready, but before it can be, I need a human test subject. I've used some animals, and it seems operational. However, for the last stage I need someone in whom I can inject the vaccine to finish the testing process for production." Thane stared back as if George Hornfield had lost his mind. The man didn't look like a scientist. He was dressed too much like a dandy business man for that. "I assure you it will be just like signing up for any other public science survey for new products being tested. I will make it well worth your while." Thane wasn't biting the bait. "I will even solve your dilemma of living arrangements for a few weeks while you stay in my home." George added enticingly.

"You want to inject me with some vaccine and pay me for it? *And* you'll give me somewhere to stay?" Thane clarified.

"That's right." Mr. Hornfield confirmed with a smile.

"Why are you offering to have me stay at your house?" Thane asked skeptically. "You don't even know me."

George seemed pleased with Thane's questions. "I'd like you to stay in my home, so you can be closely monitored, of course."

"Hm." Thane thought quietly to himself for a moment. "What are you injecting me with?"

George's smile faltered slightly. "A vaccine is for healing purposes. So, obviously, it is for a disease."

"Obviously." Thane said shortly as he leaned back in his bench seat and watched George closely. "You can't blame me for wanting to know what you're going to me shooting me up with, do you?"

George's smile didn't falter this time, but his eyebrows lowered in disapproval. "Of course, not!" His expression belied his words. "It's for dementia. My grandmother died of it. It's my motivation to see this through – to save others the heartache. She died at 64." George watched Thane carefully after this rather fluid explanation.

"My condolences." Thane said softly still frowning. "I suppose this has the potential to cause dementia?" He asked in a rhetorical way.

"Of course, that's a possibility." George lazily answered. "Are you interested or not? I'm willing to pay you ten thousand dollars for doing this outrageous favor for me."

"Ten thousand dollars?" Thane asked blankly. His eyes widened in shock. "You can't be serious."

"Yes, I am, actually," George answered grinning widely now. "You'll be staying in my rather large house as well." George leaned forward in his bench seat. "Is this a 'yes' then?" He asked as though he already knew the answer.

"How rich are you?" Thane asked in rather awed tones.

"Rich enough to pay you, I promise." Hornfield assured Thane.

"Am I the first person you've asked to do this?" Thane asked.

George's confidence seemed to fade just a little. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly?" Thane's brow furrowed in suspicion.

"I've already given the shot to a few others." George drawled, but he quickly added. "But, none of them have contracted dementia." He acted pleased that he could give this answer.

"That's good..." Thane trailed off in thought. "You did give the impression I was the first person you've asked to do this favor for you." Thane raised his eyebrows in question.

"Did I?" George asked without missing a beat. "My mistake!" He answered his own question cajolingly. With a sigh, George sat up abruptly and looked at his watch in a bit of a show. "Listen, son, I really need to get along. I have an appointment today with my sponsors that I simply cannot miss. Will you have an answer for me? Or, need I find somebody else?" George took a breath and gave Thane a closed-lipped smile and rose his eyebrows in waiting.

Thane stalled. "When do you need an answer?"

"Is it too much to ask for an answer before you leave the restaurant?" George asked in a tone that said it really wasn't a question. "I'm sitting three booths behind you. Come to me when you know your mind." George stood to go back to his table. "But, I warn you, I won't wait forever. Enjoy your food." With that, the man left Thane to his waiting meal.

Thane watched the strange dandy walk off.

"Huh." Thane grunted. He shook his head. "Weird!" *I should've asked if this would interfere with my job*, he thought too late. *It shouldn't. I mean I'm only getting a shot. Plus I'd have somewhere to stay tonight.* He mulled over potential concerns.

Now that Thane's food was cold, he bent his head and gave thanks for it. While he was at it, he asked God what he should do about this odd offer. As he ate, Thane thought and prayed about what to do. When he was finished and paid his bill, he grabbed his duffel and walked back to George's booth. Thane sat down across from Mr. Hornfield. Hope and eagerness shone in George Hornfield's eyes.

"Well? Did you come to a decision?" George asked expectantly.

"I did." Thane answered since he had not felt any opposition from God. Not to mention, he really didn't have any better offers at the moment.

"Then it is a yes?" George watched Thane closely.

Thane nodded affirmative. "Yes."

George grinned and laughed elated. "Wonderful! Can you come at once?"

"Sure, but this won't interfere with my job, will it?" Thane inquired.

Some of the enthusiasm ebbed from Hornfield's face, and frustration peeked through even as he tried to keep calm. "You have a job?"

Thane nodded. "I've had it for a couple of months. It pays well, so I would rather not lose it." Thane sat back in his seat prepared to walk away if the offer cost him his job. No matter how well this offer paid, this was temporary. Hornfield seemed to sense Thane's way of thinking and thought fast himself.

"Certainly not!" George exclaimed. "This shouldn't interfere with your job. You're merely getting a shot, really." He gave Thane a strained smile. "This really shouldn't interfere with your life as a whole, should it?"

"Good." Thane smiled in relief for the first time since George made his offer. George met Thane outside after paying for his meal and led him to his vehicle. Eyes bulged, Thane gawked at a black Bugatti Veyron with red accents in awe.

"Man! You have a nice ride, Mr. Hornfield!" Thane exclaimed slack-jawed and huffed a breathless chuckle.

"Please, call me George. Yes, it is nice, isn't it?" He smiled with pride.

"I guess. I don't have any doubts about whether you can pay me now." Thane stammered. Then, embarrassment flushed up his neck when he realized that he had said this out loud.

"I am 'comfortably provided for' you could say." Hornfield laughed with pride.

"I guess so!" Thane said emphatically. He secured his duffel to his motorcycle with bungee cords and followed George out of the restaurant parking lot to his home. If his car was impressive, his home only further confirmed just how "comfortably provided for" George Hornfield really was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GEORGE HORNFIELD seemed to have all the money in the world. If you could imagine it, he owned it. George took Thane on a tour of his mansion and some of the grounds. The tour took almost four hours, and they drove everywhere outdoors.

George's mansion was quite something to behold. First, it was outside of town and isolated. The structure was three stories tall. Large, stately, Roman-styled pillars ran along the front of the great house upholding a full balcony running the width of the house outside the second floor. Bedrooms must be on the third floor because smaller personal balconies were held up by fewer, but evenly spaced, pillars on the second floor balcony. Just gauging by the front, Thane thought that the mansion could easily be as wide as two football fields.

George showed Thane his beautifully manicured grounds all around the mansion on its thirty acres of land. Thane could tell that George was so proud of all of his gardens, hedge-maze, private lake, mansion, but most of all his great wealth.

Inside the front doors George ushered Thane into a great big foyer. The ceiling had to be eleven feet high. With a large hallway gaping at them from their left and their right, a great stairway carpeted in red began wide just to the right of the gaping hallway on the left and tapered as it wound up and out of sight leading to the second floor. Just to the right of the staircase stood two gold elevator doors and next to those was a great big fireplace with the appearance of a great big lion's mouth waiting to gobble someone whole. The rest of the foyer walls were taken up with art – all very expensive if Thane had to guess. The foyer floor was a white marble with black fibers sprinkled throughout. The walls were white with gold vine designs interrupted by red splatters that could be mistaken for flowers.

"The gold paint is not paint." George informed Thane smugly before moving him up the stairs. Thane gaped and followed in shock. Who decorated his walls with real gold?!

The second floor was the floor for entertaining, Thane was told. Gambling quarters were sectioned off over in the back left corner of the floor. The front left corner was where the culinary pleasures could be found. Thane was told that he could order anything his heart desired here anytime day or night because a man would always be manning it. Right then Thane was craving a strawberry milkshake and was served one on the spot. This was awesome!

An era-preserved, circular ball room graced the center of the second floor for dancing. Two large openings allowed guests entrance in the right and left edges of the circumference. The front right corner of the second floor was reserved for private meetings, in which guests might claim one of the ten small lounging rooms. The back right corner of the floor was separated into two parts to

accommodate four private restrooms for the men and another four for the women. Each providing small toiletries for the use of freshening one's self on a particularly long night of entertainment. All along the outside wall on the front of the mansion on the second floor were double French doors allowing the guests entrance to the balcony for some fresh air.

Thane was right about the third floor. This is where the bedrooms were held. Hornfield informed him that there were forty suites on this floor – not counting his apartment. After describing his living space, bedroom, bathrooms – for there were two – his kitchen, guest room, and storage closets – there were three – it could only be called such. Honestly, it sounded more like a house within a house.

George had given Thane free reign on the property, and he had given the staff instructions to fulfill Thane's every beck and call as they did for their master of the house. Thane was a bit overwhelmed. Having come from having next to nothing to temporarily having everything at his fingertips was a bit of a shock to the system. It would take him days of uninterrupted time before he was even familiar with his new surroundings, and he still had his job.

This was going to be a fun couple of weeks. Thane was glad he had not passed up this opportunity. He was thankful that he would have some time to really enjoy George's hospitality.

As they returned to the main foyer, George spoke pulling Thane from his thoughts of planning where he should start to enjoy the wealth around him. "I said that you had 'free reign' as it were..." George paused. Thane nodded signaling that he was following the conversation. George smiled and continued. "I'd like to amend my statement." George gestured to the elevator. "This elevator is off-limits. Really, it's out of order." He explained lazily. "I have parts coming in, in about a week, to finish the job." George's eyes honed in on Thane. "The bottom floor is where my lab is. You'll be taken down there when it's finished for your shot. I've been currently working out of the house and decided to bring the work home. I didn't realize that I would find someone so quickly." He explained with an apologizing note in his tone. "Until it's finished, enjoy yourself up here, eh?" He ended cheerily.

Thane smiled and nodded. The more Thane was around him, the more George seemed to have a strangeness about him. He just wasn't able to put his finger on it just yet. He thought maybe the wealth had maybe set something off kilter in Hornfield's mind.

"Yeah. I can do that." Thane answered with a smile. "There's definitely plenty around here to keep a guy occupied!"

"Yes, there is." George agreed. "You remember how to find the dining room?" He inquired raising his eyebrows. This was found on the first floor along with an extensive library and more. There was so much Thane couldn't remember.

Thane thought back to the tour and thought he could find it. "I think so." Thane said positively.

"Good!" George exclaimed. He gestured to a rope ending in a large tassel. "Pull one of these if you get lost. A staff member will assist you in moments." He explained with an amused twinkle in his eye. Turning he disappeared down the hallway on their left leaving Thane to his thoughts in the cavernous foyer.

Turning full circle Thane took in the great foyer. George sure had an extravagant sense of taste. Everything a king would have decorated his palace with in a show of his great wealth George decided was his taste as well. George seemed to have a cockiness about him. He truly put on an air of royalty.

Thane wondered how George made so much money. He knew that some guys just had a knack for it, but George did not seem very old and yet he seemed to have billions. Thane honestly would not have been surprised to find out that George really was a billionaire.

Remembering that George had said that he could have his choice of suites, Thane made his way up the massive staircase to choose a room. At the top of the staircase Thane was blown away at the number of doorways. Each set of doors were spaced out by several yards. How big was this house really?! Thane began opening and closing doors in search of where he would be staying for the next two weeks.

Finally, after a few doors Thane decided that he had found the one. He had finally found a room that did not seem too elegant or womanly. He had found a room that he could live in for two weeks with his manly pride still intact when he left.

The room was massive and was rightfully named a suite. Three separate rooms made up his suite, four altogether if one counted the huge walk in closet. When entering the suite one would find a sitting room complete with a large fireplace, a writing desk, and sofas. Next was the bedchamber. A massive four-poster bed, minus the traditional drapery, dominated the back wall of the room with stately nightstands on either side – a lamp on each, a couple of comfy loveseats sat around the room. The large walk-in closet could be found on the right wall of the bed chamber. A larger bathroom than was needed for just Thane was through the door in the left wall of the bedchamber. A double sink, jacuzzi, stand-up shower, closed in toilet, and large linen closet summed up the assets of Thane's bathroom. Everything about George's house seemed to be big or was not here. George took the statement "Go big, or go home" to a whole new level. He went big and brought it home with him.

By the time he had chosen his room and found a place to drop his duffel, it was time to search for the dining room. It really was not difficult. He backtracked down the hallway, down the staircase, through the foyer, paused to think, took the hallway on the right, and kept walking until he smelled food. When he smelled the food, he also heard quiet clinking signaling that he was close. Following his gut and his nose, Thane pushed open the only door for "miles," and discovered that he was right.

"Ah!" George exclaimed when he noticed Thane. "So, you found it alright. Didn't have to summon a staff member, did you?"

Thane smiled as he took his place at the *very* large table on George's right. "Nope."

"Good!" George barked encouragingly. "You'll get along here very well then, indeed."

"I think so." Thane agreed. He took a look at his food with his mouth watering in anticipation. Some sort of bird sat perfectly roasted on his plate, sautéed veggies, and Thane guessed a sort of fancy sauce sat to the side of his plate. Water waited in a goblet on the other side of his plate. Next to the water glass stood another but empty.

"I own a variety of the best wines if you're interested." George offered.

Thane's eyebrows rose. "Thanks, but, I don't drink alcohol." Thane explained. "I'm good with my water." He took a drink for good measure.

George raised his eyebrows and nearly rolled his eyes. With a smile he took a drink from his own wine-filled goblet with a sigh of satisfaction. The rest of the meal was finished in a sort of awkward silence – neither knowing really what to say to the other. The staff cleared their dishes, and George and Thane bid each other good night.



Thane thoroughly enjoyed his stay in George's mansion. He soon got used to the huge space of his room and figured out the floor plan by the end of two weeks. Their meals together in the evenings were less awkward as the days passed and easy conversation eventually made the meals more enjoyable.

Construction workers came and went down and up the elevator. They took loads and loads of parts, drywall, and metal sheets. That elevator must take them down deep beneath the earth because nothing could be heard of their work. Thane often forgot they were even in the great house unless he passed them coming out or going into the elevator.

While Thane waited for George to give him the vaccination, he worked his day job at Mason's Landscaping Company and kept an eye out for more permanent living arrangements, so that he would be ready when this fantasy came to an end. The first week of his stay Thane found nothing. There were no openings affordable to him, or the openings available were unsuitable. Midway through the second week Thane found something worth looking at and did. On one of his lunch breaks Thane left work and visited this hopeful and rare opportunity.

Thane was stoked! Finally, he had found something. He would be living in a remodeled garage-turned-apartment separate from the man's house. The older gentleman was offering decent rent for no previous credit history. He was doing this as a side income and was expecting some help around the property in the way of maintenance. All he requested was that Thane be an upstanding citizen, have no parties, and present the first month's rent upon moving in.

Thane agreed to all of his new landlord's terms and asked for a few days to get things in order. The elder gentleman agreed to give Thane until the same day the following week. Thane determined that if George did not approach him in the next three days that he was going to have to approach George.



George grinned as he thought to himself in the quiet of his study how well things had been going. Thane had been keeping to himself working and enjoying the benefits that George's hospitality could offer allowing George to work in peace. Over the last two weeks all of the remaining parts needed to finish his project in the elevator and beyond had come in, and just yesterday the construction workers informed George that all the work had been finished. Everything was set and

Thane was none the wiser. To top off matters, things on the island could not be better as far as his informants were concerned. Nothing of concern had been happening and all was going according to plan.

At least *most* everything was going according to plan. How hard was it to capture a girl? A girl. One. Honestly, George sometimes thought that he could not hire larger imbeciles if he had tried. How could the kidnapping go awry? It was supposed to be a simple affair. In the end they had lost the intended and gained another “guinea pig.” George hadn’t needed another, but why not? Now the intended girl was lost who knew where.

Anyways, he had received news the other day that that issue was being wrapped up, supposedly. So, he tried not to worry too much about it. At the moment George only had one concern to deal with and that was enough.

Briiiiiinnnggg! Driiiiiinnnggg! Briiiiiinnnggg! George startled at the sound of his desk phone ringing in the silence. Still somewhat in a positive mood George answered the phone in a mild manner.

“George Hornfield. How can I be of service to you?”

“I caught wind of some escapees from the compound, boss.” One of his lackeys on the island informed him through the speaker.

“Oh?” George sat up in his office chair with keen interest and a frown. “Where? What are they doing?”

“They're hopping on a boat to the mainland.” The lackey answered.

“How did they escape, and where are they going?” George began to lose patience. “Give me the details and be quick about it!”

“Word is that they're coming to the United States to find you.” The other man didn’t sound ruffled in the least. “Not sure how they escaped, sir.”

George's eyes widened. “Oh, they are, are they?”

“Sir?”

“What?!”

“Dr. Yassiff has gone missing.”

George growled ferociously and hung up. “Jim! *Jim!*”

George's butler, Jim, came in with a bland expression. “Sir?”

“I'm going on vacation, Jim.”

“Yes, sir.” Jim answered and promptly pulled a pad and pen from one of his inside jacket pockets to take down some notes.

“I'm going on vacation in the Philippines—” George caught sight of Thane in the hallway waiting to enter for their prearranged meeting. “I'm going to the Philippines next month. Make the

arrangements, won't you, Jim?" George waved Jim away. "Thane! Right on time." Jim flipped his notebook shut and bowed out at his master's dismissal.

"Thane!" George said enthusiastically. "Just the man I wanted to see." He smiled broadly.

Thane entered and took a seat across from the man behind the desk. "I actually wanted to speak to you, too."

"Oh?" George's smile slipped as he raised his eyebrows. "What about?"

"I've really appreciated staying here, but I think that I've overstayed."

"Says who?" George interrupted with a scowl. He'd fire the first name that Thane spoke. Really. Did everything have to fall apart all today?

"Well... No one." Thane reassured slowly. "But..."

"Well! Thane, really, don't worry about it. You're here for me, don't you remember?" George reminded Thane reclining in his big office chair with his hands folded together.

"Yes, I do. Which is the other thing that I'd like to talk to you about." Thane said sitting forward in his chair. "I believe that I have found somewhere else to live."

This caught George's attention immediately. "You did?" He asked flatly.

"Yes, sir."

"I hope that you haven't forgotten our arrangement?"

"No, that's why I'm bringing it up." Thane rushed. "I have to give him my first month's rent in the next couple of days, and I would like to jump on this opportunity before I lose out. Options are slim these days." Thane explained.

"Understandable." George said slowly. "You do need to be in observation for a couple of weeks you do recall? *After* taking the injection..." He prompted.

"Yes, I do." Thane said losing a little patience. "Which brings me to the shot... I've already been here for a couple of weeks. Has the vaccine come yet?" Thane asked George looking him dead in the eye.

George grinned. "Yes, it has – yesterday, in fact. What say you to getting this shot over with tomorrow morning? I suggest calling in for work. I don't think you'll be making it in. I really need a full 24 hours of initial observation."

"Sure." Thane said exhaling a sigh. Relief that they were finally moving forward on this set in. "What time should I be ready?"

"Seven AM sharp!" George said cheerily. "Take the elevator down. I'll meet you there."

Thane's eyebrows went up. "The elevator? I thought it was off limits."

"The construction is finished." George said through tight lips. "I'll see you in the morning!" He said more brightly.

Thane nodded. "I'll see you in the morning." Thane repeated and left the office to call his employer.

George sank back into his chair after Thane left with a hard scowl on his face. Escapees? Dr. Yassiff – gone? How? Really, were there *any* competent help these days. He rubbed his forehead as a headache began to build pressure behind his eyes. Well, on the bright side he was going to have a nice vacation. He slumped in his chair with a sigh. George really hated hiccups in his plans.

Meanwhile, Thane was getting an uneasy feeling, but he could not put his finger on why. Other than he felt that George was hiding something of importance from him. Thane felt he was missing something right in front of him. All he could do though, having no evidence, was go forward and trust God would help him as he needed it. Thane put his call through, and he made his way up to his room to think about tomorrow and what the morning might bring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE ELEVATOR whirred as it went down then stopped with a clunk. Thane stood in the ominous silence, his mind raced in fear of what horrible thing awaited him on the other side of those metal doors. What was his next challenge? Would he survive?

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Thane had already been through two other challenges since this morning. When Thane first entered the golden elevator at five 'til seven, he had expected to enter George's lab when the doors slid open. He would get his shot then be on his way to kill time until the next morning when he could return to work. This was not the case. When the golden elevator doors slid open, Thane stepped out into a metal room entirely bare with the exception of another elevator awaiting him on the other side.

With a frown Thane had moved toward the other elevator thinking this one must lead him to the lab. The floor was made of several metal panels. Thane's step onto the first panel had caused it to shake and falter. Even more confused Thane quickly stepped onto the next panel and looked back to find the previous panel fall away into black nothingness.

"What the—" Thane choked. Getting over the shock of the first panel falling away behind him, Thane realized that the panel he now stood upon shook rapidly. Thane hopped onto the next panel as if his was on fire. The panel gave way immediately after he left it. Each panel shook more fiercely than the last and fell away faster and faster. Thane was truly scared. There were four inches of solid floor right in front of the elevator doors. What if the elevator didn't open before that last panel fell taking him with it?

Thane didn't have time to think and evaluate a different option. The panels began to fall faster and faster with each step. Sweating profusely from trying to stay alive and with the effort of not thinking of what will happen if the elevator doors didn't open, Thane finally reached them and punched the up button with relief and anticipation. Thankfully the doors slid open with the barest of hesitation. Thane leaped inside just as the last floor panel fell away beneath him and waited.

Looking around the elevator as the doors slid shut and the elevator began to go up, Thane noticed that there weren't any floor options. There wasn't even a screen above the doors showing how many floors he was passing or which he was headed to. All this not knowing was starting to get to him. Hopefully that last room was just faulty construction work. He'd have to tell George about it. Something niggled in Thane's brain that told him that this wasn't the case, but he ignored it.

The doors slid open again and Thane was greeted by a fierce red-eyed robot with some scary looking machine guns trained on his chest. Thane's mouth gaped. The hovering mass of metal looked ready to kill. Waking him from his stupor was a pre-recorded robotic voice that came from some speakers hidden from view.

"You have five minutes to disarm the robot and enter the elevator on the other side of this room. The elevator will not open if the robot is still functioning." In case Thane thought the recording spoke to someone else it continued. "Thane Jett, begin." Thane heard the worst hitched click of two big guns being cocked and ready to fire. The robot came to life then and raised itself a little higher. It stretched its guns toward Thane. Thane finally came to himself at the last second and dodged the robot's shots just in time.

Coming to his senses Thane realized what the recording said. He can't just dodge the robot until he was safely in the elevator and leave. The robot had to go down first. Having no weapons of his own, Thane scrutinized the robot in between dodges. He noticed some wires hanging from it. On his next dodge Thane pulled a wire on his way passed. One of the robot's guns fell limp and nonfunctional. Thane whooped in premature victory.

The robot began to shoot in a frenzy with its now single functioning gun. Thane ducked and rolled and ran and dodged shots feeling as if he was living his last moments. He knew his five minutes had to be close to being over. He really did not want to find out what would happen if he hadn't left yet.

Finally, Thane noticed a red reset button on the robot's back on his last pass and aimed for it on his next escape – but missed. Red lights began rolling around the room in warning as the recording began to count down from ten.

"Ten... Nine... Eight..."

Thane began to breathe heavily as panic set in. Desperation made him act stupidly. Thane grabbed hold of the attacking robot's nonfunctional arm and tried to punch the red reset button. As he worked hard to stay out of the way of the functional gun, the frenzied robot tried to shake him off and shoot him at the same time.

"Seven... Six... Five... Four..." The recording continued to taunt Thane.

Thane shouted an angry guttural cry in pain. The robot managed to graze Thane's arm that gripped its limp one with a shot. Now angry, scared, and hurt, Thane yelled a battle cry and raise his unharmed arm in a fist ready to punch the robot's reset button.

"Three... TWO... O-" The recording sounded in slow-motion until it stopped abruptly. The robot fell in a heap on the floor, and Thane inspected his arm as he panted in fear and pain.

Thane staggered slowly over to the elevator and slapped the button to enter. Thane stepped in and looked for the option to return to the top floor so that he could leave. Whatever this was Thane did not sign up for this! There was no option. He didn't have a choice where this elevator took him. Thane's face crumpled in defeat as he leaned his head back against the wall and prayed aloud.

“What is going on, God? Why am I being put through this?” Thane swallowed a lump in his throat. “Let there be a swift end if this is my day to die.” A tear slipped down his cheek, and Thane angrily swiped it away. “I look forward to seeing you, Lord, but can I come in the least amount of pain?” With these words the elevator landed.

Thane jumped. He quickly stepped to the side wall, and flattened himself up against it so as not to be in direct view. He took care to keep his eyes on the doors as they slid open. Then all was silent again.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and peered outside, trying his best to breathe quietly. A small, metal-plated room lay before him, eerily lit with a glowing purple ceiling that seemed to dim and brighten with no apparent pattern. The left and right walls were close together at the bottom, angling out so that the top ends were far apart. On the far wall stood a metal door with a small eye-slit towards the top, and beside it was a metallic cylinder, about the size of a nightstand, on top of which sat something shaped like a cone.

Thane reluctantly stepped out of the elevator and walked over to get a closer look; he finally dared to breathe freely again. The object on the shiny cylinder turned out to be a glass lab beaker, clear with a bright green liquid inside, corked at the top. There was also a picture on the side. It was a thermometer that showed a very low temperature. He didn't know what the liquid was, but he didn't like the looks of it and certainly didn't want to drink it. Taking his eyes off of the strange potion, he turned and walked to the door. The slit was at perfect eye level, allowing him to look through effortlessly. On the other side of the door was a long straight hallway. So long in fact, it stretched out of view appearing endless. The hallway was the same shape as the room with the same outward leaning sides, and the same glowing ceiling; it was as if someone had taken the room he was in and stretched it as far as it could possibly go. Thane looked down at the pad and instinctively placed his hand on it. Nothing happened. He pushed. Still nothing. Then he backed up and pushed on the cold door, but it was in vain. He stared at the hand pad, then looked back at the beaker. He scrunched his eyebrows and froze as a horrifying thought occurred to him. He looked back at the pad. It was the same green color as the potion.

Thane realized what had to be done. The hand-pad would not open the door unless he drank the potion, which he assumed, from the thermometer picture labeled on it, would lower his body temperature enough to match the hand-pad's requirements. But he was no fool! He knew anything that would significantly lower his body's temperature would be fatal. *There must be an anecdote at the other end of the hallway*, he thought. *There must be!* It would be a race against time. Just in case Thane tried the hand-pad again anyway. It flashed red and showed his body temperature was too high.

With a grimace Thane walked back to the beaker on the cylinder and picked it up with an uneasy feeling. He fidgeted with it for a minute, then made his decision. He pulled out the cork, lifted the beaker to his lips, and tilted back his head gulping down the potion. The taste was a sort of tinny, toxic battery flavor that he'd never experienced before; it made him want to spew it everywhere, but with effort he didn't. He stopped to take a breath before swallowing the rest. Finishing, he slammed the empty beaker back down on the cylinder, a sour expression on his face. He felt the effects immediately: an icy feeling started in his stomach and quickly grew to the rest of his body.

Beginning to shiver he jogged to the door and pressed his shaking hand on the pad. The door opened, just as he predicted, sliding down into the floor.

Thane raced down the hallway as fast as his legs would carry him. At first he felt fine, just a little cold. But no end was yet in sight. As he ran, he slowly felt his head start to pound. Then it got worse, accompanied by tingling in his hands and feet. Still, the hallway seemed endless, vanishing into the distance. Now, Thane could feel his body being taken over by the substance. He huffed and puffed as he sprinted; every breath took more effort than the last. By now the tingling had grown and turned into sharp pain, the pounding in his head made him dizzy, and his vision was starting to blur.

He ran and ran in fear of death for what seemed like an eternity. Getting enormously tired and suffering more and more pain, Thane finally saw an end to the hallway. By this time his ears had begun to ring and his entire body throbbed with excruciating pain. Suddenly he started twitching. This made his running much more awkward and forced. The end grew nearer even if it was blurry. The twitching now became uncontrollable and a muscle spasm in his leg combined with another new pain in his side threw him to the ground. Thane got up with much effort, went some distance in a stumbling jog then collapsed again. He looked up squinting in an attempt to clear his vision. He was close. Now shaking violently, he continued along in a half walk – half bear crawl, unable to stand up.

Finally the end was about fifteen feet away; there was no door, just a doorway. Thane fell onto his chest, shaking like a fish out of water, and howled in agony. Pulling himself along, his vision was beginning to fade, and his suffering was overtaking him. He got closer and closer with each time he kicked and dragged his way along. When he finally made it through the doorway, a metallic cylinder that he could barely see stood in front of him – taunting him. He groaned loudly as he rolled over and kicked it on its side. The beaker that sat on top fell and shattered. Glass scattered everywhere and the blue liquid that had been inside slowly merged outward with the glass in a puddle. With all the effort Thane had left, he scooted himself closer and slurped up the clue antidote potion like a dog. Thane drank avoiding glass as best he could when everything faded.

Hours later, Thane drifted back into consciousness. He felt fine besides a massive migraine. Luckily, as he lifted his head, he only had a few glass cuts on the side of his face and not on his tongue. He slowly got up, a little stiff with a few pangs of soreness to boot, and looked around. When he turned to his right, he saw another elevator. With grim determination and clenched fists, Thane walked in and the doors closed.



The elevator doors opened to black open space. Blinding light flared to life illuminating a large empty steel room. Thane took a look at the room around him. Although, Thane wasn't a hundred percent sure what it was. He appeared to be in an observation room. The walls were made of large steel plates pieced together with one big window in the opposite wall. Thane couldn't determine the height of the room because the lights were too bright, and there were too many of them.

Evil laughter filled the room and echoed off the steep plates. Feeling surrounded, Thane turned circles attempting to discover the owner of such an awful noise.

“Thane. I see you have made it at last.” The voice chuckled sounding annoyed. Thane thought it sounded familiar. “It only took you four hours.” The sarcasm in the man’s tone as he said this was thick. Thane glared at the window trying to figure out who it was behind this. *George. George Hornfield. It had to be. He was the one that threw me into this nightmare!*

Thane took a step closer to see him more clearly only to freeze all motion immediately. In the short silence Thane heard an almost imperceptible click. Then he heard another, and another... The clicks began to get louder and louder as steel plates began to slide out of place. Thane stared in consternation.

“Ha! Ha! You might have thought life was rough a couple of weeks ago, but it’s about to get a whole lot ‘better’.” The hidden man spoke sarcastically. “You might have been able to keep yourself hidden all these years. But, I’ve found you, of course; and I’ll be keeping you until your twin arrives.” Thane’s face scrunched in confusion at this.

“Twin? I don’t have a twin.” Thane hollered back thoroughly confused. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It isn’t important whether you understand or not.” George growled. “Either way, you’re staying here as long as it takes for him to get here. I heard just this morning that he was on his way – I hope he doesn’t take too long for your sake. Hope your stay is comfortable.” The man laughed.

Just as the man’s laugh died off a great hissing sound filled the room. Thane’s gaze darted over the walls back and forth as great steel tentacles spilled into the room: two from the ceiling and two from the floor. The ends of the tentacles gaped with openings like the wide end of a cone.

The four tentacles hung from the walls and rose up from off the floor until all four openings gaped back at him. An awfully dark purple goo oozed out of the tentacles and gravitated toward him. Paralyzed Thane stared watching the purple goo slowly come toward him. Awakening from his stupor, he jumped out of the way and backed away from the awful stuff. As he moved, the goo would change course and continue to follow him at a faster pace. The tentacles had also turned to face him.

The more Thane avoided the goo and changed course the faster the goo poured from the tentacles. Thane tried to leave the way he came in, but he couldn’t find the door. It just looked like another steel plate. Because he had turned around so many times in the attempt to escape the purple goo, Thane had forgotten which wall held the door.

Just as Thane thought he’d found it, he couldn’t take another step. The goo had engulfed his feet. Unable to move Thane was at the goo’s mercy. It continued to slide up his legs, over his torso, his arms, and finally his head. Thane managed one last gulp of air. He closed his eyes awaiting anxiously what was to happen next.

There was a large pop that felt as though the air between his skin and the goo exploded. Thane could breathe again! He was now enclosed in a huge purple bubble of sorts. Thane could see the tentacles’ gaping ends touch the outside of the bubble: two above and two below. Thane felt the bubble begin to rise from the ground. He’d expected to fall through, but he didn’t.

More purple goo began to fill up the bubble. Again, Thane managed one last breath before he was engulfed once more. Pointed tubes poked at his palms and the bottoms of his feet. Once again robbed of movement, Thane waited. The tubes finally found the right spot and excruciating pain charged from his hands and feet and made its way to his chest.

So great was the pain, Thane convulsed so that he curled inward. The goo was too strong for him to curl completely; however, so he now looked as if he was sitting in an armchair. As the pain began to subside, his heart rate began to slow. Whatever substance was now in his system began to pulsate a slow and steady beat. His heart rate began to beat at the same pace.

Although his thoughts were just as slow as his heart rate, Thane was still conscious. As he hung suspended in the awful goo, Thane sent up a silent prayer.

“Lord... please protect... my twin. Keep him safe... Bring along... the right friends... and helpers... Please... save them. Please... save me!”

EPILOGUE

JACK AND DRAKE were in deep discussion about how they might help organize the Nordoms when they and the girls returned to the island to take down the compound when Jack suddenly had a faraway look on his face. Drake frowned.

“What is it?” Drake asked him when Jack remained silent for several minutes. Jack continued to stare off into space for a few more minutes.

“There’s a voice...” Jack trailed trying to concentrate on what was going on in his head, but he also tried tell Drake about it.

“A voice...?” Drake prompted.

“Yeah...” Jack’s frown of confusion deepened. “It’s weird...” Jack remained distant for a few more minutes before finally he looked Drake in the eye.

“What’s weird?” Drake asked.

“I heard someone else’s voice in my head.” Jack paused in thought. “It sounded like he was praying.”

“He?” Drake asked.

“Yeah, it was a guy.”

“Huh.” Drake grunted. “What was he praying?”

“He was praying for someone’s safety and for help...”

“Who’s?” Drake asked slowly.

“His twin’s...”

Drake started and raise his eyebrows, taken aback. “Yours?”

“No.” Jack frowned at his friend. “At least I don’t think so. I grew up in an orphanage, and they didn’t tell me anything about my family.”

“Hm.” Drake scowled thoughtfully. “Well... Let’s start with this: Have you ever heard anyone else in your head before?”

“No.” Jack said with total certainty. “That would be a new talent from the serum.”

“Ok. Well. I didn’t hear him, and I have always had that talent since being injected.” Drake noted. “There must be a special link between him and you.” Jack nodded, encouraging Drake to continue. The girls walked over to listen at this point. “Do you know where he is?”

Jack thought hard. He closed his eyes and tried to reconnect to the voice that spoke in his mind. After a few moments he picked up very slow brain activity. The voice was still there, but the words were so far apart that Jack was surprised that most of them actually seemed to be following the same line of thought. As he listened, Jack tried to focus on where the person might be. Jack realized that the voice was not on the island.

“He’s not on the island.”

“I agree.”

“What?” It was Jack’s turn to be taken aback. “How...”

“I piggybacked your signal, *per se*.” Drake drawled.

“Don’t worry! He’s done it to me, too.” Gale piped up. “It’s how we found the both of you.” She smiled. Jack looked at Stephanie to see if she thought it was just as weird as he did. That sweet Gale thought that was reassuring just confirmed how socially out of the loop she was. Someone reading your mind when you did not know it was not reassuring no matter how many times they had done it before. Stephanie was in agreement according to the odd look she currently had aimed at their little red-headed friend.

“Your twin is in the United States.” Drake stated matter-of-factly.

Jack’s head spun at whiplashing speeds. “What?!”

“Your twin is in...” Drake began to repeat himself sounding a little bored.

“I heard you! What makes you think that guy is my twin?” Jack specified agitatedly.

“Because of what you just told me.” Drake said blandly. Jack thought back on what he had told Drake. Drake sighed. “You had not had the talent of telepathy with anyone else, so it isn’t one of your primary talents. You said that you don’t know your family history. For all you know you could have had a twin all this time and just didn’t know it. I think this is proof.” Drake saw Jack’s look of confusion and continued. “I believe your twin was injected with the serum or a modified version allowing him to have contact with you.”

“All that makes a bit of sense...” Jack hedged.

“Makes perfect sense to me.” Drake said.

“And me!” said Gale.

“Sure.” Stephanie said brightly. “I think so, too.”

Jack thought on it and finally agreed. “Alright, I see the logic you’re using.”

“Jack Jett, you have a twin.” Drake announced.

THE
SERUM
deception

>Book 2<

Excerpt

CHAPTER

ONE

JACK JETT sighed as he looked around his hotel room then out of the third story window. Today he felt a sense of hopelessness. He really didn't know how to move forward. Having grown up in the compound, Jack had no idea how the real world worked outside of those walls. He was so unsure of where he and Stephanie Nelson should go and how to get there.

To make matters worse he didn't have Drake to ask advice. That self-assured brute would know what to do. Yesterday Drake Garrison and Gale Bailey went back to the island. They had all agreed unanimously that it was the best move to split up so that they could tackle more faster. Jack and Stephanie would find Jack's twin that had spoken in his mind on the boat on the way to the mainland, and they would also find this George Hornfield guy that seemed to be the evil mind and main financier for the compound operations back on the island. Drake and Gale would return to the island to help in uniting and organizing the Nordoms for battle when the time came.

Jack was having second thoughts about splitting up. *We should have stayed together!* Jack grumped.

Drake was better suited for this job because of his unmovable stoic-stubbornness. Too bad there weren't two of him. Drake had a way of making things happen without getting ruffled in the process. Nothing seemed to ruffle Drake – except Gale. Gale decided that she was going to go with Drake, even though he said that she should stay with Jack and Stephanie. There was no deterring that sprite of a woman – not that Drake had tried very hard. Jack suspected that the big guy had a soft spot for the little red-head. Drake managed to convince Gale that it was his way or the highway when he put his foot down, and Gale would follow along – most of the time. They were quite a pair and, looking at them, couldn't be more opposite. They were both stubborn as mules. That could be why it was so much fun to have them around – for the entertainment.

Stephanie knocked on Jack's hotel room door and waited patiently outside. It took a couple of beats before he opened the door with a smile. Stephanie smiled back a bit uncertainly, trying to read him.

"Hi." She said.

"Hi." Jack greeted her. "Come in." He ushered her into the room and went back to stare out the window. He grabbed his coffee cup off the table on his way. When Jack reached his destination, he motioned Stephanie to help herself to the coffee he had made.

Stephanie entered the room and closed the door behind her. She made her way over the small coffee pot provided by the hotel and poured the contents into a paper cup. She ripped open and poured in a couple of packets each of sugar and creamer into her coffee and stirred it around in the cup with a straw stirrer. Holding it just below her nose, Stephanie breathed deeply savoring the smell. It smelled heavenly in the morning. Stephanie took a tentative sip being cautious of the steamy temperature of the beverage and nearly spewed the hot liquid from her mouth. *More sugar. Yes, it definitely needed more sugar, and more cream – more everything. Goodness! This stuff was absolutely terrible!* Stephanie could see Jack's shoulders shake in laughter out of the corner of her eye. She scowled in his direction.

"What are you laughing at? You can't possibly have *liked* the taste of *that* stuff!" She accused.

Jack shrugged. "Actually..." He trailed with a mischievous smile.

Stephanie gaped. "Nuh-uh!" She took a quick step in his direction to peer into his cup, but he angled away somewhat defensively. "Uh-huh. That's what I thought." Stephanie laughed triumphantly. "You haven't drunk hardly any, and it's doctored to high heaven isn't it?" She lowered her lids and gave him a closed lip smile in smug boredom.

Jack chuckled sheepishly. "You're almost right. It was *very* doctored, but I just finished it. So, I eventually got it to my liking."

Stephanie grimaced. "I don't think I will ever like coffee." She said this as she ripped open the remaining sugars and poured them in her drink. Jack laughed out loud as she did this and went back to staring out the window. His mirth soon disappeared, and he became very contemplative. Stephanie choked down a few swallows of her drink before giving up. She disposed of it, pouring it down the drain and tossing the cup. She went to stand beside Jack. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at Jack's serious face.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked him quietly as if she were trying not to break his concentration.

"I'm trying to determine our next move." He answered on a sigh. "I'm not sure what to do." His eyebrows dipped as he frowned. "The guy that's supposedly my twin is not thinking very clearly, so it's hard to keep tabs on him or his location."

Stephanie listened in silence as she, too, frowned trying to determine what she could say to be encouraging. She was just as lost as Jack out here. Before she could come up with something, Jack spoke up.

"I think he's sedated." He spoke slowly as if he were tapping into the connection Drake had secured for Jack with his telepathic ability right then and trying to explain what he could. "That's the only thing

that makes sense because of how his mind is so slow... like barely four words per minute. It's really hard to make sense of his thoughts. Mostly he's praying, I think."

"Well, that's comforting that he knows God, at least." Stephanie put in.

Jack shrugged, tilted his head, and raised his eyebrows in agreement to her statement. "I just wish I could get a hold of where he is long enough to nail down his location. We're going to have to move so slow in order to find him, and we're likely to get caught by someone from the island or even by George Hornfield's men." Jack sighed exasperatedly.

"Jack," Stephanie pulled at his shoulder to get his attention. "Snap out of it. We got out of the compound. We're here – safe. You have a twin – family. All this and all you can do is worry? Stop a minute and think of the silver linings glaring at you." Stephanie spoke reprovingly. Then she gestured to the window and looked as if she had had an epiphany. "Or, even just the one about having a twin. We are headed to go find a member of your *family*. Jack, you are going to meet up with a family member, no matter how long it takes. Something that none of us others kidnapped by those men in the compound will probably *ever* have the opportunity to do." Stephanie pressed her lips together and stared deep into Jack's eyes, silently pleading with him to understand what she was saying. "You have so much to be thankful for. You just do the best you can, and we're sure to get there." Stephanie crossed her arms in a way that suggested that she was comforting herself with her words, not just Jack.

Jack released a pent-up breath and stared down into Stephanie's eyes. He smiled wanly. "Thanks, Steph." He squeezed her arm gently. "You're right." He dropped his hand and his gaze and appeared to be reflecting on what she had said.

"I *know* I'm right." She grinned cheekily up at him. "What happened to the guy that got all fired up back at the compound to do something about all that evil going on back there? Where'd *he* go?"

Jack shrugged and scowled out the window.

"We need him to lead this crazy thing so that we can win."

"I just don't think I can." Jack said softly.

"Why not?" Stephanie asked just as quietly.

"The world seemed so much smaller on that island. It's so big out here." Jack gestured with both hands out the window. Jack released a heavy sigh. "I don't have any idea how to navigate this world. It's too big to telepathically explore. The compound was big, but the whole world is *way* bigger."

"I'm just as lost out here as you are." She reminded him. "That's why we'll work together on this." Stephanie said in a placating way.

Jack smiled. "Yeah... ok." He took a deep breath and seemed to be fortifying himself for the adventure they were about to embark on.

"Hey," Jack looked down at Stephanie when she spoke. She continued, "I think that you make a great leader. I know from comparing you to Drake." Stephanie laughed at Jack's mixed look of confusion and skepticism in her logic. "It's because he's just that kind of guy that makes you think of a bull barging

through a China shop. He knocks everything into chaos just because he can't be bothered to worry about those delicate glass pieces while he's attacking his goal. He's got tunnel vision."

Jack snorted in amusement at Stephanie's description of Drake.

"You take care for the small details in your actions and plans. That's what will make you a great leader. You can do this, and I believe in you."

Jack looked slyly down at Stephanie. "How many times do you want me to say, 'thank you'?"

Stephanie laughed.

"Cause you seem a little like you're gloating over the fact that you're able to be so much more positive than I am, and keep a straight head on your shoulders. Seems like you're always setting me straight again."

"Well, I kind of am..." Stephanie trailed smugly.

"Which one?" Jack raised his eyebrows. "Gloating or setting me straight?"

"Both! Duh!" Stephanie burst in a singsong tone and laughed.

Jack laughed. "All right." He finally said. "I'll get my act together and let you know what the plan is." He smiled down at her in a way that assured her that he was thinking clearly again.

Stephanie smiled back and took a step toward the door. "I'll be going then. I'm going to pack up my stuff, and I'll be waiting for you in the lobby." Jack nodded in acknowledgement. Stephanie nodded exaggeratedly as she took a large step in the direction of the door before swiftly leaving him to his thoughts and to pack up her things like she said she would.

Jack chuckled under his breath and straightened to look out the window again. This time he enjoyed the sun that he saw, and the blue sky, and the colors of the Fall leaves remaining on the trees and just looked. After a minute Jack turned and sunk into one of the two arm chairs placed at the small round table in the corner of his room. He bowed his head and held it in his hands as he rested his elbows on the hard surface of the wood table. He rubbed his temples before looking up to stare at the wall. Time to make a plan.

There to his left, by the phone, was a note pad and pen with the hotel logo on them. That'll do. Jack sat quietly at first and focused on the mental connection Drake had created in Jack's head to help him find his twin. Jack only had impressions of Thane's surroundings from the connection. He had discovered that was his brother's name from listening into his thoughts. Jack began to write down all the things he thought he knew about where he and Stephanie would be heading. So far all he knew was that they were going to need to head toward the west coast. He wrote a few more notes from what he picked up this time from his brother and stood to pack.

Jack swiftly stood and began to unceremoniously throw all of his newly acquired belongings into his backpack. When they had come into port Drake, Gale, Stephanie and him all bought some new clothes and toiletries for their travels, and they each purchased a backpack in which they carried these new belongings. Jack gave his room a once over just in case he forgot something and made sure he didn't

leave the place a wreck. He snatched the notepad and pen and swung his backpack over his shoulder then left to find Stephanie in the lobby and check out of their rooms. When they got something to eat, they would discuss how to travel to the west coast. Since they missed breakfast at the hotel, they would have to find something to eat somewhere else.

CHAPTER

Two

A TAXI ride and thirty-five minutes later Jack and Stephanie were seated in a fast food restaurant munching away when Jack broke the silence.

“So, I figure that we’re going to need to find ways to make some money as we go along. Our funds are nearly gone already. We only have about three or four dollars left.” Jack informed Stephanie, who raised her eyebrows in concern. “For future I think we should only purchase one room a night. Renting two rooms was pretty expensive. My room had two beds, so I’m sure we could find the same arrangement somewhere along the way.” Jack suggested. Stephanie pinched her lips together to keep from voicing how weird that might be.

Jack smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes completely as if he knew what she was thinking. “We’re also going to need to figure out how to make more money besides just making cuts in where we spend it. Four dollars isn’t going to get us even one room, let alone another meal.” Jack chuckled mirthlessly. “We’re used to working hard, so I figure that we could do anything someone’s willing to pay us for.” This he said with confidence.

“Well... yes.” Stephanie trailed off uncertainly. “But how will we *find* the work?”

“That’s a good question.” Jack turned smug. “Weren’t you the one telling me that we would be fine in the hotel? Something like: just to do our best...” He trailed and wiggled his eyebrows at Stephanie.

Stephanie flushed. “Yes, smarty pants. Way to use my own advice back at me.” She smiled sheepishly.

Jack laughed. “Yep. It was good advice.”

“Yeah. Great advice.” Stephanie said sarcastically. “I still don’t see how we’re going to find work.” As an afterthought, she added. “Where are we going anyway?”

“To the other side of America as far as I can tell.”

Stephanie gaped. "Isn't that far?"

"Yes. It's very far."

"So how are we getting there?"

"I figure we could grab rides from people on the busy roads that could take us in that direction." Jack shrugged.

"And work?" Stephanie asked uncertainly.

"We'll ask the drivers if they know of any work around the area. Places or people that will pay cash for a day's work or two days max. I'd like to keep on the move as much as possible."

Stephanie nodded appreciatively. "So, you *do* have a plan. You *can* lead." She winked.

Jack mildly flushed on his neck and brushed it off. "Speaking of moving... we need to go find our first ride." He said already standing. Stephanie helped clear their trash and followed Jack outside to hitch a ride with, hopefully, a kind citizen.



Meanwhile...

Thane Jett had been on the run for the last 24 hours since escaping from George Hornfield's strange house of horrors. It was amazing that he had got out at all; and when he did, he had to face a desert. It wasn't so bad at first. He had his motorcycle for the first hundred and eighty miles; but then the gas tank ran out, and he had to walk the last 30 miles. That's when things really got messy.



Thane was under some heavy sedation. He merely floated in his mind and outside of reality surrounded by pulsing purple goo holding him suspended in mid-air. A large, purple, gooey oval held Thane captive in a dream-like state deep underground beneath George's mansion for about a week – up until about a minute ago when reality suddenly came flooding back to him.

The burning was back. The serum that had been pumped into his veins began to burn again all throughout his body. The first time it was short-lived, but this time seemed to be making up for that. His veins burned, and then a thick substance was shoved forcefully in behind the serum. This seemed to be having a strange battle at the entrance point in his hands and feet.

Thane's body contorted in pain within the supple substance holding his body. Thane was unable to shout or groan in pain because of the muffling effects of the goo. Finally, the battle ended, and the thick substance sluggishly made its way through his system. The pain was unbearable, but after what seemed like forever, it was finally over.

Thane just breathed. Within about a minute he didn't feel any pain. It was almost as if the terrible agony he had just endured had possibly only been a dream. In surprise Thane gasped in the sudden

rush of air on his face, and his eyes burst open wide only to scrunch shut at the blinding light shining through his half-empty cocoon. Thane peeked through his lashes to watch as the remainder of the goo emptied out through the bottom two tentacles attached to the bottom of the purple sphere that he was currently sitting in.

Thane felt pretty sluggish since he had been suspended and unable to move for a whole week. He flexed his toes and fingers, testing them. The sphere was set down, and Thane ducked as it spontaneously cracked and shattered. The pieces showered all around him.

“Thane Jett, please, make your way through the door at the back of the room.” A kindly woman’s voice came echoing through unseen speakers hidden in the blinding light shining above him. She sounded breathless in a sort of panicked way. Thane craned his neck around to spot the open door the lady was talking about only to be spurred into action. “Quickly, Thane!” The voice urged.

Thane sloppily scrambled to his feet and through the hardened goo shards lying around him and finally through the open doorway. A woman waited for him at the top of a tallish metal staircase to the right of the door. At the top Thane and the woman entered a small, dark room – except for the shining screens on the computers used to control the room that Thane had just come from. The woman held a bottled substance and a wrapped food stuff. Thane had never seen either before.

“My name is Anna. There isn’t enough time for you to do anything but trust me.” Anna handed Thane the drink and snack and bade him to eat. “These should sustain you until you reach town again.” She continued as Thane opened the bottled drink and took a sip of the thick liquid. He grimaced but forced himself to keep drinking. “I urge you to stay off the main roads and go through the desert. Any one of Mr. Hornfield’s other men would catch you if you don’t.” Anna quickly informed him.

“Why are you helping me?” Thane croaked with the disuse of his voice box.

“I told you. There’s no time for that.” Anna frowned. “Now quickly finish those and follow me.” Anna took Thane up a very tall spiral staircase winding up into blackness from the corner of the control room. At the top they cautiously emerged into George’s library from behind a bookshelf. “This way.” Anna directed. She shoved the bookcase back into place and led Thane to the door. Cautiously she peeked around the library door leading out into the hallway. She only opened it a crack. Before they exited the room, Anna appeared to swallow back her own fear then she turned to address Thane.

“Why–?” Thane began, but Anna cut him off with a scowl.

“Not now.” She said impatiently. “Come quickly.” Anna hurried Thane through the library door and down several halls before they finally reached the grand foyer that had wowed Thane when he first several weeks ago. Thane took a final disgusted look around now that he knew what the purpose of his stay really was. It was amazing that they hadn’t run into anyone except one other person that they easily evaded. Thane made mention of this.

“It’s because Mr. Hornfield is off on vacation to the Philippines, so fewer servants come to the front of the house. Most are in the back in the kitchens and servants’ quarters.” Anna explained. She added. “It’s also why we’re going through the front door and not a back or side door.” Thane blanched at this but said nothing and clenched his jaw instead.

The two found Thane's motorcycle hidden away in a locked shed. Anna picked the lock and instructed Thane to count to forty, giving her enough time to get away and find herself an alibi, before he started the engine. Thane nodded in understanding. He thanked her before Anna ran off.

"Thank you, Anna." She only smiled shyly and ran off toward the mansion. Once she was out of sight, Thane began counting.



The last thirty miles in the desert were hard because he really thought that the town south of George's place on the horizon was a mirage. Thane covered most of the desert on his motorcycle. He gunned it as far as he could and even rode it as long it rolled on fumes. He was distraught about leaving his prized machine in the middle of the desert, likely to never be seen again. It was his first purchase after getting his first job. It was his mark of independence and freedom from the orphanage that felt so suffocating at the time. He hadn't been able to get out of there fast enough, then. If only he knew what awaited him... He wouldn't have been so quick to grow up, especially after this horrible turn of events. He should never have taken George up on his offer. He had been so naïve.

As Thane continued to put his feet one in front of the other, he hoped that the buildings that he saw weren't a mirage – that Anna was right about the town. There was only one way to find out because he was definitely *not* going back. Thane had continued to push his tired feet through the blistering desert with the sun beating down on him. It had to be about late supper time, and Thane was pooped.

Finally, he had made it! Thane was ready to drop, but he dragged himself onto the town sidewalks on the outskirts of the town. He had to push himself. George would surely have men after him by now. What about Anna?

Thane needed water. He *really* wanted some water. And food. But, he mostly wanted the water. Why was it so hot? What time of year was it – summer? Must be. The *dead* of summer. That's right. Thane was going to be dead – because it was summer – and because there was no water. Where were the stores? There! There was a store! Water! Thane wasn't really paying any attention to his surroundings; neither did he remember that he didn't have any money on him. He only had one goal in mind, and that was to find water.

All those weeks ago when he had made that fateful trip down the golden elevator in George's rich foyer, Thane hadn't thought to put money in his pocket just in case. He was just going down below for a shot then he'd be hanging out at the soda bar upstairs on the second floor or riding an ATV on the grounds. Those had been his plans, anyway. HA! If only he had known, he would have never stayed with George Hornfield in his beautiful trap. Trap. That is exactly what that man's richly furnished mansion had been.

Thane stepped down off the sidewalk and stumbled not realizing that he was crossing a street. Cars honked, and brakes screeched. Thane stopped as his brain tried to process what he had done. Being dehydrated and exhausted with possible heat stroke, Thane stood practically paralyzed in the street with cars dodging him all around.

Just as Thane was coming back to himself enough to move back toward the sidewalk, he caught sight of a blue truck racing right at him. He only had a split second to think that it was odd that while the other vehicles dodged this dazed pedestrian; Thane thought he saw the truck swerve across a lane toward him instead of away. Having no reflexes to speak of, Thane practically stood and watched the truck coming right at him. The last thing he remembered was the impact. The hit knocked Thane unconscious instantly.

CHAPTER

THREE

GEORGE HORNFIELD burst into the study of his mansion in the Philippines with his anger barely contained. In his fist he clenched a crumpled missive informing him that the escapees from the compound made it off the island and are actually making their way across America to find him. It doesn't matter that he isn't in the USA anymore. What matters is that there are pesky little brats after him. Regardless of whether they are competent or not, they posed a problem and needed to be dealt with.

George sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose just as he reached his enormous and gleaming cherry wood desk. Taking a deep calming breath, he snatched his phone from where it rested on the receiver and punched the speed dial button for the island's direct line to the compound. Impatient, George rolled his eyes as he listened to the phone ring on their end. While he waited, he closed his eyes and finally began to calm down.

He was stressed because he had little to no confidence in his men anymore. Ever since they failed to capture his scientist's daughter and bring her to the compound for leverage on the old man, George's men have consistently been making mistakes. That's another thing! They lost his scientist as well! The useless imbeciles let his scientist walk off the island under their very noses!

George groaned over this loss. They were only going to be able to make enough merchandise to finish off the serum the good Dr. Mark Yassiff had made and left behind. Thankfully they had enough merchandise all ready and waiting for purchase and also leftover serum to make a few more. The doctors back at the compound were doing well weeding through and making lists of the best merchandise for selling. George smiled at all the zeroes floating behind his eyes from thinking of all the profits he was going to be making from each sale. This really was the best business arrangement – extremely profitable.

"Boss." The man on the other end answered the phone at last.

“Monroe?” George asked for clarification.

“Yes, sir.”

“I just got your note that was in the foyer waiting for me here in the Philippines. After all these years you’ve decided to let the operation fall apart at the hinges?!” George fumed over the line. “Monroe, really, what is the meaning of this incompetency?”

“I apologize, sir.”

“Monroe.” George groaned. “‘I apologize, sir.’ Is that all you have to say for yourself? You allowed my *scientist* – the key part of this operation, might I remind you – to get away, and all you have to say is, ‘I’m sorry’?!” George snarled. “You’re an imbecile! How about telling me how this happened instead?”

“Somehow he must have had a contact on the outside with whom he arranged an escape.” Monroe spoke unconvincingly.

“How?” George’s tone conveyed his disbelief in Monroe’s answer.

“I’m not sure. All of his emails have been closely monitored and checked and rechecked before and after he disappeared. He hasn’t sent out any mail. We’ve seen to that. Honestly, sir, I really have no idea how anyone could’ve even known that he was here in the first place.” Monroe sighed his frustration into the phone and into George’s ear. Hornfield grimaced impatiently. “Sir,” Monroe continued, “I interviewed every single person on staff – security included. I am nearly one hundred percent sure that no one on the inside was involved, and no one is holding anything back. No one in the compound or involved in the compound workings on the outside has any idea how anyone could have found or assisted the doctor to escape. I’m at a loss.”

“None of what you have said so far is anywhere *near* what I was hoping to hear.” George said quietly over the phone, barely restraining his frustration.

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Monroe answered with defeated tones from the other end of the line.

“Do you?!” George was incredulous. “You can’t *possibly* understand! *You* don’t know all that is at stake here. *You* have no idea what kind of a headache is chewing on my hind-end threatening me with all kinds of pain if this all comes crashing down. Enough excuses, Monroe! Get me some answers. Get it done *yesterday!*” George Hornfield yelled into the phone and slammed it down on the receiver in a fit. Still in a huff George lit up a cigar and buzzed for his butler to bring him a drink.

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A couple of hours and many cups of strong black coffee later, George began making phone calls. He had to contact his men on the continent to capture the nuisances trying to find him. George made a point of not even bothering to call the imbeciles that went to the wrong *continent*, Norway, to find Kelly Yassiff for him. He really didn’t have the time nor the patience to pick up the pieces for those kind of mistakes. George needed to get moving on selling the merchandise. Now that he had decent portfolio to present, and he had a process that worked, George needed to move the merchandise

faster. Since there were people out there that could potentially make all his plans and hard labor crumble, George really needed to push sales harder on these rich fools.

George's first call was to Ben Richmen – the man that *almost* didn't fail him. George sighed. His options were just so limited. He really should have invested more time into hiring better help. Balance is the key. He spent too much of his resources and time into the main goal: produce merchandise. That was the most important thing, besides distributing them. He needed to get them spread all over the world. That was what he had been instructed to do. So, that was what he had concentrated on. Because of that, he now had to deal with incompetent men and women that couldn't even snatch a girl and hang onto her for any length of time. George Hornfield was still at a loss as to how Kellie had been kidnapped by his people *twice*, and she still escaped.

Ben Richmen answered His boss's phone call on the second ring. "Sir. What can I do for you?"

"Good question, Richmen. What *can* you do for me *well*?" George sneered.

"Sir?" Richmen asked hesitantly, unsure of what to say.

"Never mind." George growled across the line. "Richmen, I need you to discover the whereabouts of some misplaced merchandise that seems to be on a mission to find me in the states. I'm currently in the Philippines." Hornfield filled his man in before Ben could waste time asking about his whereabouts. "Richmen, do you think you could apprehend them and bring them to me?"

"But, sir, aren't they looking for you?" Ben asked confused about the man's logic.

"Yes!" George snapped. "They are. I would rather you bring them to me and lock them away where I know they cannot interfere with my plans than let them find me unawares and ruin everything!"

"Ok. I understand, sir." Ben answered. "Thank you for this opportunity! I won't disappoint... again." He ended weakly.

"Stop groveling. Just catch the escaped merchandise, and don't muck this up like you did the last time with the girl!" George Hornfield snarled with such venom that the man on the other end of the line feared for not only his job but his very life if he messed up this time.

A similar conversation volleyed across the angry man's phone line with Mitch and Delia. These two were the other of his henchmen that had failed to hang onto Kelly Yassiff. He had even less patience for this pair since they couldn't hold onto her for more than an hour. Ben had at least been able to keep her within reach for a few hours, but not Mitch and Delia. No, they lost the girl after *less* than one hour. Pathetic. He really didn't have much hope that they would bring in the merchandise, but the more eyes on the lookout the better. The more information one had, the more power to control the situation.

George Hornfield decided, as an extra precaution, to call on his men at the mansion to keep a greater vigil on the property in preparation for the arrival of the menaces searching for him. That's how much faith he had in Ben, Mitch and Delia – none.

Once he finished his phone calls, George received a phone call of his own. It was from his butler in Nevada. Because of the news the butler delivered over the phone, Hornfield's pure rage could have burnt everything around him to smoldering ashes. Another specimen was lost. What was happening?!

George burst from the study and found his way to the adjacent drawing room. Long, anger-fueled strides took him over to his bar in the corner. George splashed himself rather large servings of alcohol. He tossed back three tumblers before he decided on a plan of action. Inebriated and not thinking clearly, he slammed his glass down on the counter and rushed to the drawing room door. Swinging the heavy double doors wide, George thrust himself from the room and stood slightly off kilter in the hallway and hollered at the top of his lungs.

"Max-Oane!" George bellowed. He bellowed again and again until the hustling butler came to a halt before his master. The well-trained man barely looked flushed and kept great composure in the sight of his enraged employer. George continued to yell at the poor man. "Max-Oane, we're blowing it up!" Hornfield declared.

"Sir?" The middle-aged butler questioned. "Blowing it up, sir?" He asked slowly.

George suddenly grinned with wide, crazed eyes. He was flushed from his over-indulgence of alcohol and began to believe that his idea was a grand idea. *Too much bad news will do that to a man*, he told himself. *Yes, there's only so much a man could take before he had to deliver bad news to someone else. Yes, that's what I'm going to do. This will feel much better than a right hook to someone's jaw. There's too many of them that I'd like to punch anyway. So, I'll just knock out a whole slew of imbeciles in one foul swoop.*

George began to laugh manically as he walked briskly down the hall toward the basement stairs that normally only the servants used to reach their quarters. The butler followed behind quietly. George and the butler made their way down the stairs, through the kitchen, and down the hall past all the women servants' rooms. Just before they turned to pass the restrooms, George halted to gather his bearings. Straightening his coat, Hornfield turned to the left to stare at what appeared to be a dead end. A brick wall stood before him. The bricks were old and faded. Some were beginning to crumble. George waved for his butler to get on with it. Max-Oane moved forward with a bow and pressed two unassuming bricks into the wall then pulled an empty old sconce on the right near the adjoining wall.

The brick wall slid to the left with minimal dust disturbance and, except for a dull scraping, no one from the kitchen would hear the noise. George strode through the opening and lights immediately came to life. His butler followed, and the brick wall closed behind them. The room was small with bare cement walls and floors. It held a single computer stationed in the center of the room on a small desk with a grand desk chair. A 110-inch UHDTV dominated the attention in the room as it was mounted on the opposite wall and only a couple of inches of wall surrounded the monstrosity on both sides and on top.

George stared with a wicked gleam at the dark screen. "Max-Oane. Bring up the mansion in Nevada."

The butler complied. He bowed and moved to take a seat at the computer. After tapping away for a few moments, the large screen came to life and gave a satellite view of Hornfield's mansion in Nevada. The beautiful grounds and obvious show of wealth the land and building portrayed caused George to

hesitate a moment in his decision. He stared and enjoyed the scene before him. Just as he was about to abort the mission, he recalled the reason for his anger in the first place. His face hardened and his hands fisted and shook at his sides.

“Max-Oane.” His voice was low and shook with such anger the butler dared not turn his head for fear his own nervousness might be noticed and bring his master’s rage upon himself.

“Yes, sir?” He asked gently in attempt to appease the man’s heated state somewhat.

“Load and fire our largest missile. I don’t want anything left standing of this place.” George seethed, his alcoholic breath puffing from his mouth to disturb a hair on his man’s immaculate hair-do.

“Sir?” The butler hesitated.

“Don’t ask questions! Do!” George ordered, spittle flung from his mouth to spray the monitor as he also flung himself up against the desk chair to grab hold for balance and in show of his seriousness.

The butler clamped his lips closed against his suggestion of warning the inhabitants and pressed the buttons to ready the requested missile. Before he could get himself to press the button to activate and fire the missile. Max-Oane’s conscience pricked him. “Sir...” He hesitated.

“What?!” George Hornfield glared down at the man addressing him.

“The people inside. Should I send an evacuation message?” The butler hoped for the affirmative behind an impassive exterior.

“No.” George glanced back at the image on the big screen TV. “This is their punishment.” He said with such dark venom. Max-Oane turned away from his employer and called upon all of his years of training to remove himself mentally from the situation, so that he would not have to live the experience all over behind the closed door of his quarters that night.

“The missile is ready then, sir.” Max-Oane informed Hornfield in a wooden tone.

“Fire!” George yelled, and his butler obeyed.

There was a moment’s pause before a great explosion, soundless, burst forth huge and bright on the massive flat screen that glared down on the two men watching it. One man had the countenance of one who had mentally removed himself from the situation, but in reality – the man he was on the inside was breaking even though the shell on the outside showed differently. It would be many long hours before he would be able to close his eyes and succumb to sleep without seeing the bright orange and white burst that destroyed a luxurious mansion and so many lives within. Even with the master of the home gone there would be a minimum of forty servants around to keep the home and grounds maintained in his absence. The man beneath the butler’s stoic facade wept silently in his heart for the many lost souls.

The other man in the room however seemed to have a moment of great joy! The absurdity! Having just murdered so many people in a simple rage... It wasn’t right. George Hornfield grinned dementedly at the screen satisfied that the people there had paid a decent enough price for allowing Thane Jett to escape his mansion – No! – for *helping* him escape. There wasn’t any possible way that Thane would

have been able to get away by himself, dangling in the air in the great big gob of serum that George had trapped him in. As Thane hung, his body would be in a mode of hibernation with only slight consciousness, so that he would be unable to think clearly enough to realize the changes in his body or even to formulate a plan of escape. If it were even possible, which it wasn't.

George's rage that had begun to ebb away at the sight of the explosion, began to resurface again. How could they do this to him? Don't they know what is at stake? No. No they don't. He was careful to keep them in the dark as he was instructed. They were under his employ, so they should have continued on with the instructions left with them. He began to turn to leave the small room to make another phone call. He turned back for a moment with narrowed eyes. Who could have been the one to do it? George stood contemplating the matter for a few seconds, and then he sniffed. Well, whoever it was, is dead now. With that he turned, and Max-Oane opened the secret door-in-the-wall. George passed him and immediately dialed a couple of his men that were in Nevada near the mansion's previous location.

"Jargon. You and Bleak need to capture the boy that escaped the mansion. It's vital to the operations that he doesn't have a chance to contact the authorities!"

"No need to worry about that, boss." Jargon answered lazily on the other end.

"What do you mean?" George asked.

"I flattened him with my truck. There's no way he survived." Jargon answered smugly.

"Imbecile!" George raged. "I needed him alive!" George seethed through the phone. He began to pace in the dim hallway just a few yards from the bustling kitchen. "Did you make sure that he was dead for certain?" He asked as an afterthought.

It was getting near lunchtime. Max-Oane waited patiently for his master's orders. George waved him off. Max-Oane nodded his head respectfully then headed toward the kitchen. He was careful not to go too far away or get too busy in case his master needed him shortly.

"Well, no. There's no way any ol' human being could manage to walk away from the hit he took from my truck. He dented my fender!" Jargon scoffed.

"He's not any normal human being. He's probably still in the hospital." Hornfield corrected Jargon. "Go, find him, and bring him to me. Be on guard. He may have discovered some interesting abilities by now." George ordered his man and promptly ended the call. George prayed hard in his heart to anyone and anything that his men wouldn't blow this one. He needed to gain control of all this mess before he was paid a visit by the one man on the planet that could intimidate George Hornfield.

> End Excerpt <

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