



# Scars of Defiance

by Lorena Angell

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# Chapter 1

Through her lashes Sierra watched the two men, one who had repeatedly beaten her to near death, and the other who continually nursed her back to life, as they discussed her frail condition.

“I don’t care if she has to be wheeled in on a gurney, she will marry my son in four days time. Why isn’t she responding to the medications?” Reginald Rawlings asked Dr. John R. Roth

“She seems to have lost her will to live, sir. Perhaps the wedding should be delayed.”

“She only needs to live long enough to become Victor’s wife, although I would prefer she produce an heir, but her royal name alone will garner the support I need.” Reginald glanced at his watch and adjusted his too tight silk tie. “I must make an appearance at the engagement celebration and try to explain her absence,” he pointed to Sierra as he walked backward toward the exit.

The door to the palace infirmary clicked closed and Sierra let out the trapped air in her lungs. Dr. Roth hurried over to her side and threw the blankets off.

“Now, Princess Sierra. Quickly, there isn’t much time.” He rushed into the nearby supply closet.

“Dr. Roth, please don’t call me princess.” She swung her slim bruised legs over the edge of the bed and pulled off her hospital gown. Dr. Roth came out of the closet with a pile of clothing and helped her dress. Three layers of shirts, two pairs of pants, two pairs of wool socks, boots, then he guided her arms into a military green jacket and tucked her long dark blond hair up into a soldier’s hat. He added a fake mustache above her top lip for the finishing touch, all this in a matter of five minutes.

“I don’t know why Reginald was so late tonight. The plane is supposed to leave in ten minutes and they damn well better wait for you.”

“John, thank you for everything,” Sierra placed her hand on Dr. Roth’s arm and looked in his eyes. “Without you, I’d be dead.”

“Well, you’re not out of the palace just yet so you might want to save your thanks until you’ve crossed the border. Do you remember every detail I told you?” She nodded. “The cab driver will have your coat and hat in the vehicle. Be safe Sierra and good luck.”

She exited the infirmary and walked quickly down the empty corridor to the door Dr. Roth had specified as an unmarked exit, leading to the service door. Once outside, she increased her pace across the parking lot to the service entry gate. She had yet to run into any employees

or guards, even at the gate. As Dr. Roth promised, a yellow cab awaited her at the gate to take her to the airport. She opened the back passenger side door of the cab and climbed in.

“Good evening, Ms. Montgomery. Hold on, these roads are nasty.” The driver greeted her with an unrecognizable accent. He wore a ball cap backwards on his head covering what little remained of his military style black hair.

She had no doubt the roads might be wickedly slick. The raging snow storm had started earlier in the day and settled a dark cloud over her hopes of escaping. Sierra looked to her left and found her coat and wool hat on the seat. She immediately took off the military hat and mustache and stuffed her hair up into the wool cap. Then she pulled the ear-flaps down and tied the strings securely under her chin. Next she removed the military jacket and wiggled into her thick coat.

The cab driver didn't say much more to her and for most of the hectic ride she stared out the window. The streetlights dim glow did little to illuminate the roads. A massive weather system had settled in and the snow flakes fell so fast and thick they blanketed out the incandescent light. As they turned up one particular street, the wintry white world plunged into darkness with the exception of the slight beams of light from the snow covered headlights.

Sierra wondered where the road led to, what would be at the end of it. For her to sit quietly in the backseat and not question her unknown driver went against her normal self so much she almost laughed at the thought. She knew he must be from the underground and associated with the insurgents, and yet it didn't bother her, at least not like it would have a couple months ago when they tried to assassinate her.

They rounded a corner and she began to recognize airplane hangers. They'd reached the airport, entering in through a back door of sorts. The vehicle pulled up near an awaiting cargo plane preparing for take off.

"Here you are, Ms. Montgomery. Good luck." He winked.

She didn't say anything to him, only exited the cab and walked toward to her escape. She approached the idling plane sitting on the tarmac with uncertainty and dread shooting through her body settling in the pit of her stomach like an anvil. The airplane looked as if it had been towed in from the airplane graveyard and given a bogus stamp of approval. Several mismatching panels had been bolted on and thick rust covered all the seams and screws.

It couldn't be too dangerous could it? The pilot and co-pilot felt safe enough with the condition of the bucket of bolts to fly it. Other people boarded even after examining it,

so perhaps Sierra was being too pessimistic. However, the plane's viability wasn't the only thing bothering her. The nasty blizzard hampering the workers had her uptight too, along with visibility problems and icing. Even if the airplane could get off the ground, would it be able to maintain altitude?

She was torn. This dilapidated plane symbolized possible freedom from the Rawlings' dominating presence in her life; it also epitomized where she felt her life was headed—death. Perhaps the two were the same.

She took her place in line with the fierce wind blowing snow in her face. She had taken the time prior to her escape, to inflate and tie off baggies and stuff them in between the layers of her coat, the idea being to disguise and hide her petite body. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to recognize her. She definitely looked like a different person; certainly not royalty. The baggies were acting as an insulation barrier against the bitter cold wind; an unexpected plus.

A female probably in her late fifty's helped strap a parachute on Sierra's back. She spoke loudly because of the roaring engines, but not quite loud enough for Sierra to hear everything. She knew she was missing valuable instructions.

One of the last defectors to board the plane, Sierra sat

on the bench stretching down the pilot's side of the fuselage next to the person in front of her with the remaining people following suit. Sierra leaned forward and glanced down the bench at the other twenty or so individuals on the plane. No one looked back at her. All eyes focused on the floor. Several fellow defectors breathed rapidly with their frozen exhales lingering in front of them. Did they worry about the airplane like she did? Probably.

Were any of them running from Reginald Rawlings like her? Or fleeing the oppressed life in their country? She sat back and stared straight ahead at the boxes and crates that filled the other nine tenths of the plane. Straps, cords and netting stretched this way and that, securing the cargo in place. She really hoped they did their job because if the load shifted her legs might be smashed, and if she survived this escape attempt, she'd need them to run with.

She had nothing left in Rendier. Her father, Donald Montgomery, had been her last remaining living relative due to the fact Reginald's father, Alexandar, eliminated most of the Montgomery royal family twenty-five years ago. Her father and mother lived in hiding until Sierra turned seven and Reginald took over his father's reign. After months of encouragement from Reginald to come out of hiding, Donald and his family emerged.

Reginald quickly invited Donald to join his board of advisers. Soon after that, Sierra's mother died. Sierra



didn't remember much about her, only that she seemed sad. Any time she'd ask her father about her mother, he'd sink into depression, so she decided the past would be forgotten and move forward.

The airplane door slammed shut bouncing Sierra's head off the wall. Her back hurt as she sat on the hard bench inside the rumbling old plane. Even though her thick coat padded her back against the metal wall, it ached from the lashings she'd received from Reginald one week previous. After so much failure, she'd given up on trying to escape her impending marriage to Reginald's son, Victor, and had been refusing to eat for several weeks in an attempt to liberate herself altogether. Reginald thought a good lashing would pull her out of her rebellion.

Little did he know, Sierra would hear the following day the flight across the border would be taking off soon. She became determined to be on it; however, now that she sat aboard, her heart raced like thundering hooves at a race track.

The engines revved louder and the plane began to shake. They started to roll forward. A man stood in the doorway of the cockpit and yelled instructions in a high pitched voice.

"Your chute opens with the cord on your left shoulder. When you jump, count to five, and then pull your chute. If it

fails, pull the backup chute with the cord under your arm. Remember to roll when you hit the ice to prevent it from breaking. If you go through the ice, release your pack using these clasps and swim like hell.”

Sierra closed her eyes and tried not to think of what was to come as the airplane accelerated down the runway. The stiff wind pushed against the plane resisting the attempt to go airborne as if the wind itself operated under the control of Reginald Rawlings, like everything else in Rendier. The nose of the plane angled upward and the tires left the ground. The dip and sway made Sierra nauseous.

She forced her mind to focus on memories instead of her impending death. Like the memory of when her father informed her Reginald’s son had chosen her to be his bride. It came as such a shock to hear Victor was even interested in her. She knew his friend Riley Stone had a crush on her and continually pestered her to go out with him. She refused naturally. But Victor?

At age twelve, Sierra entered a school for more privileged kids. Up until that point she’d traveled the country with her father on business. She did her studies with the help of tutors and nannies. Once she turned twelve, her father decided she needed formal schooling and interaction with other kids her own age. That’s when she met Riley.

He seemed nice enough and friendly toward her at first. By age fifteen, he'd become Victor's friend and changed completely. The two of them ruled the school because no one dared stand up against Reginald Rawlings's son.

Victor had such an over inflated head and ego, it was hard for Sierra to be around him. It didn't help matters that his good looks and charisma had girls falling at his feet. She'd shake her head in amazement at the idiotic attempts of the other girls for his attentions. Of course, it wasn't only Victor they wanted, Riley was equally handsome with a muscled body. Being the best friend of Victor gave him access to top of the line exercise equipment and personal trainers.

The two of them together was a lethal combination. They could have any girl they wanted and they usually did. Riley was the one who sought to date Sierra, not Victor. In their junior and senior years, Riley stepped up his efforts to win over Sierra. He'd follow her, stalk her and arrange to have her next to him in class. She couldn't stand it. Riley was fake. Sierra didn't want a guy who couldn't act normal. It confused Riley that she didn't fall for his charms like the other girls, or perhaps it intrigued him because he kept trying.

Then, one day during the summer after graduation, her father took her for a drive. She remembered the moment well as it was only four months ago. On the drive, he asked

her if she would like to marry Victor Rawlings. Of course her answer was a big fat no. Then the confusion set in. Why did Victor want her to be his bride? It was so unexpected and unexplained, but no more so than when her father suddenly died after he informed Reginald Sierra did not want to marry Victor.

His death, ruled as a heart attack, seemed so sudden and unexplainable. He hadn't had any prior health problems and then out of the blue, he died. Sierra immediately suspected foul play. She'd been overtaken with grief and wasn't able to think straight enough to investigate further. Involving the law wasn't an option. Reginald Rawlings was the law.

It was no minor coincidence either that she'd just rejected the marriage proposal of Rawlings's son prior to her father's death. She should have suspected forces beyond her control aimed at placing her in the palace with the spoiled son of the dictator.

Even though she had just turned eighteen, Reginald insisted—no, demanded she come live in the palace for her own protection. She'd been selected to be the bride of the future ruler of Rendier and as such, it was entirely possible her life could be in danger now. The fact she'd declined the proposal seemed to matter not.

It had been four months since her father died

unexpectedly and she'd been taken to the palace. Four months since Reginald Rawlings basically admitted to her he murdered her father, four months of attempted escapes, and brutal beatings when she would fail. Hopefully, she'd been beaten for the last time. If this escape attempt worked, she'd never have to see this country again.

She had gained the friendship of an important ally within the palace; Dr. Roth. He would tend to her lashings and injuries following every beating Reginald issued. At first, she felt he tried to keep a safe distance from the situation, but as time went on, she saw his compassion for her plight.

It went against the Hippocratic Oath to continue turning his head the other direction. He became determined to help her escape; to flee the country and her horrible captive life. So he allied himself with the dangerous insurgent underground in the effort to secure safe transport across the border for Sierra. Why they agreed to help, she didn't know. It hadn't been too long ago that they tried to assassinate her.

On that fateful day four months ago as Reginald revealed his evil actions to her, she learned it wasn't so much about why Victor had picked her as it was the fact she was the last living female of the Montgomery monarchy. Reginald hadn't been aware she existed until they emerged from hiding. He'd put two and two together, realizing his

son and Sierra were the same age, and formed his plot at that point. He employed Donald so he could keep a close eye on her while she grew to adulthood. She realized now that even if Victor hadn't asked her to marry him, Reginald would have arranged it. Her father had stood in Reginald's way and he'd been eliminated. Had her mother tried to interfere too?

The plane bounced and swayed as it pushed forward through the storm climbing in altitude. The right side of the plane dipped as they cornered north toward Baylend; the only boarding country to Rendier. The small country of Rendier hung down from the main continent as a peninsula. The Trejo Mountain Range separated the two countries with a thirty mile wide impassable border. The only road cutting through the range was closely guarded with a gated border which eliminated escaping by vehicle as an option. Hiking through the mountains had its own perils. If one survived the harsh wilderness and wild animals they would still need to have advanced mountain climbing skills and techniques to navigate up and over the wicked peaks. The mountain range truly formed a brick wall against escapees.

The waters around Rendier were patrolled heavily also. Escaping by boat was near impossible for Sierra which left flying as the only option. Dr. Roth helped her secure a spot on the plane that ferried defectors across the border.

The expense involved in fleeing truly shocked Sierra,

but she quickly realized buying silence is expensive. Air traffic controllers needed a lot of money to turn their heads the other way while a covert mission took place under their noses. Airport guards accepted bribe money almost eagerly. Their meager wages allotted by Reginald needed the supplemental income from border crossers to support their families, who, like most people of Rendier, lived in poverty.

The expense didn't end there, once she landed in Baylend she would need to pay money to the operators of the crosser home who took her in; kind of like an elaborate hotel complete with security.

Most people in Rendier lived in poverty and couldn't afford to escape the ruthless Rawlings's rule. Sierra only could because of the life insurance money from her father's recent death. Ironically, Reginald was responsible for his murder and was now inadvertently funding her escape.

Perhaps the greater irony was Donald's life insurance was being used to fund the flight that would take his daughter to her death. A gentle tear escaped and slid down her cheek. She missed her father. If only she'd just said yes to the marriage proposal, perhaps he would still be alive today.

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“Did she make the plane?” Clive B. Roberts switched the telephone receiver to his other hand.

“Yes, Mr. Roberts, I dropped her off in time. I should tell you, I had to take out one of the gate guards. He hadn’t been affected by the poison and I couldn’t risk him seeing Sierra leave. He’d have sent out the alarm.”

“Its fine, I’ll make some calls and have the body removed before anyone discovers him. You did your job well, son. Stop by and I’ll give you your payment.”

“Thank you, sir. Let me know if I can be of service in any other way.”

Mr. Roberts hung up the phone and sat back in his chair.

“Was it a successful departure?” A man sitting on the other side of the room asked Mr. Roberts.

“Yes. The plane crossed the border already, undetected.”

“Do you need me to take care of a body?”

“Yes, a guard at the service gate. Work your magic on this one. We can’t have Reginald thinking he needs to be suspicious.”



“We should have just killed her while we had the chance. You know Reginald will find her and bring her back.”

“Yes, I figure he will. He can’t let the last Montgomery slip from his grips. But I want the good doctor to join our side, so we are playing his game. When they bring her back, we’ll dispose of her then.”

The man got up and left the room leaving Mr. Roberts alone to think. If the other assassination attempts on Sierra’s life had been successful, it would have never been discovered that Dr. Roth worked against Reginald Rawlings. No, this was a beautiful discovery and it would be used to the best advantage of the underground.

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Sierra’s left hand held the leather strap above her head and her right hand clutched her vomit bag. The terrible turbulence associated with the storm was enough to test even the strongest of stomachs. Several other defectors had already used theirs and she feared she would lose the battle with her stomach also.

She pushed her thoughts back to the reasons she fled; Victor and Reginald Rawlings. She remembered her father’s funeral and how the small gathering of mourners was interrupted by the cavalcade of armored vehicles

bringing Reginald to the services. He used the pretense that Donald Montgomery had been his trusted adviser and he came to pay his respects, but Sierra knew better. She knew how Reginald's mind worked. She suspected her father's death to be Reginald's fault some way or another, only she didn't have proof.

After the services, Reginald spoke with Sierra and offered her residency at the palace. "There have been threats against your life, Sierra," Reginald spoke loudly enough to be heard by others, yet with an exaggerated gracious concern for her well being.

"Really?" her tone of sarcasm didn't go unnoticed.

"It is my business to know of possible threats to myself or my family. I've known you since you were a little girl and I consider you my daughter. Please come to the palace until we can nullify the threats against you, for your own safety, Sierra."

She knew there was no point in refusing him. He wouldn't let up until he got what he wanted. He wanted her at the palace so she could be announced as Victor's future bride. If she only knew then what she knew now, she would have put him off for a day or two and disappeared, instead, she agreed. In essence, she gave away all of her freedom and entered the guarded gates of the palace to become a prisoner.

She remembered the first few days of palace life; pampered and pleasant. She hadn't seen Victor more than twice and it was only in passing when she did. She saw Riley more often, however. It wasn't unusual for Riley to be at the palace, he was Victor's best friend. To see him and know he must be angry with Victor for taking Sierra away from him made her wonder what kind of friendship they actually had.

Her lodgings were exquisite with several handmaids appointed to her. It seemed like a fairytale life until Reginald caught her talking with Riley. She remembered the events well as if it were yesterday, but it was four months ago.

Riley found her walking the hall and pulled her into a vacant room.

"Riley, what are you doing?" She twisted her arm free from his grasp and stepped back a bit.

"I have to talk with you."

"What?" she impatiently folded her arms across her chest.

"I can get you out of here. I can help you escape."

"I'd love to get out of here, but not with you."

“I shouldn’t have told him. I feel like it’s my fault.” He massaged his temples as if they hurt and closed his eyes.

“What are you talking about? What’s your fault?” It shocked her that Riley could feel at fault for anything.

Footsteps outside the door caused them to freeze in their spots until the steps faded as they passed by.

He closed the gap between them and grabbed both her shoulders directing her face to his. “He wouldn’t have wanted you if he didn’t know I did. I should have kept my mouth shut. They warned me, I screwed up, but I can make it better. Leave with me and I’ll keep you safe.”

“Who’s ‘they’? What are you talking about?”

“We have to hurry, Sierra.” The urgency in his voice scared her.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re babbling on about what, I don’t know.” She wiggled away from him and moved away to the other side of the room putting distance between them.

“He only wants to marry you because I wanted you first.”

“What?”

“He doesn’t truly want you. Your life will be unhappy with

him, and when he gets tired of you, he'll move on to someone else, discarding you like an empty milk jug."

"You sure know how to make a girl feel good, Riley." She turned her back to him and walked toward the door.

He crossed the room in four quick steps and spun her around by the shoulders. His finger tips dug into her skin and the frantic sound of his voice frightened her. "You're not taking me seriously. Listen to me! You are a prisoner here. I can help you escape, but you have to trust me."

"I can't do that. You only want to even the score with Victor. You're mad at him, more than you want to help me. Leave me alone, Riley or I'll tell Victor what you're up to."

The door burst open and several armed guards entered followed by Reginald Rawlings. "What's going on in here, Sierra?" His eyes moved from her to Riley with a heated anger and Riley quickly released his grip on her and stepped back.

She turned her back to Riley. "Nothing, we were just having a little discussion. But we're done now, aren't we Riley." She looked over her shoulder.

"Yes, we're done."

Sierra picked up on his intended double meaning. The look in his eye and the intent behind it scared her as he

calmly reported to Reginald. "Sierra was asking me how to escape from the palace and I strongly advised against it."

Astounded, she quickly looked back at Reginald. "That's not true! He's lying! He came to me with,"

Reginald cut her off with the back of his hand across her face. She was so stunned by the action she stumbled backwards into Riley. Riley held her under her arms to give her stability. Her eyes instantly filled with moisture. Not tears; that would be giving Reginald satisfaction. She gained her own footing once again and pushed Riley away.

Reginald stepped up to her, "You are nothing but an insolent, immature, unappreciative girl who has yet to learn her place. I shall take it upon myself to teach you." He turned to his guards and flicked his hand toward the door. "Take her to the 'blue' room."

Sierra remembered the long walk to the 'blue' room, appropriately named because when you left it you were covered with blue bruises. She remembered being crumpled on the floor after her first beating, and the many times she was pushed through the doorway since then. The cruel memories brought the fresh sting of tears to her eyes.

Reginald's lecture preceding her first beating sealed her suspicions. "You are here, alive, because of me. And this is how you thank me? By trying to escape? I have

cushioned your life since you were seven years old, giving you every opportunity and letting you experience things no other girl your age would ever dream of. It is time you learned your level of importance and your place, Sierra Montgomery, and I will teach you until it sinks in to your obstinate mind. If there was still a throne, you'd be an heir to it. Now my son will marry into the royal line the people of this country cling so dearly to. You will bring peace to my reign. You only have to smile and wave. But if you persist in your rebellious behavior, I will make your life extremely miserable.”

The next four months consisted of attempted escapes followed by beatings and lectures. It didn't matter how many times Reginald beat her; it didn't deter her from trying to escape. It only strengthened her resolve to never again be subject to cruelty by a man's hand.

In Sierra Montgomery's mind escape was preferable, but death was acceptable.

She reached to her upper left arm and pulled the knot of the fluorescent orange bandanna tighter. She knew how it worked, she knew what to expect, but it still left her uneasy. Once on the ground in Baylend, and assuming she was still alive, she would need to make her way to the town of Slaterville located on the lake's northern shore. There she would have to wait on the side of the road till someone came for her. The orange bandanna labeled her as a

crosser in need of assistance. Hopefully a caregiver would come to pick her up; hopefully they would be good caregivers.

She'd heard stories about crosser homes and the horrible dealings that sometimes occurred; the abuse, the fleecing of money, or the betrayal of the defector just to get the reward money from Reginald Rawlings for turning them in. It loomed in the back of her mind, but she'd still take her chances. She had nothing left in Rendier.

The pilot yelled over the speaker, "Folks, we are nearing drop off. Good luck and God bless."

The door opened and a rush of freezing wind forced its way through the cargo hold. People were already jumping out of the plane and Sierra's heart raced so fast she thought it might explode.

Everyone prior to her had slid down the bench and jumped out. Now it was her turn. Bravely, she stood in front of the door. The wind was unbearably cold and felt like glass shards ripping her flesh from her face. The helper patted her back and placed the ripcord into Sierra's hand. She jumped into the blackness, counted to five and pulled the cord.

The jolt of her chute opening sent her stomach to her toes. The icy wind was nothing now as her face was



completely numb. She was glad, a little, that the dark prevented her from seeing how far the ground was below. She brought her wrist to her face and glanced at the face of her elaborate watch/altimeter her father had given her when she turned sixteen. The glow-in-the-dark dials and numbers were barely visible. Three thousand feet. She looked below into the darkness as she fell.

It seemed like an eternity as she glided through the gloom. Then she broke through the underside of the clouds and she saw the lights of the town named Slaterville. She checked her altimeter. Eight hundred feet; soon, very soon. She readied her body for impact. Roll when you hit, she'd been told.

The ground was coming up fast and she saw the ice now. She could see strange movement on the ice. No, in the ice. The jumpers had crashed through the ice!

No! No! She wanted to be back on the plane, she wanted to be anywhere but here at this moment. She was about to plunge into the freezing water of the lake. The ice wasn't thick enough! This wasn't the death she'd have chosen.

Her feet connected with the ice in a spot still intact, but not for long. She attempted the rolling technique but the force cracked the thin ice. She went under the water completely. So cold! So black. No air!

Struggling to remain calm, she reached up to her parachute cords. Her chute remained on the ice. If only she could follow the cords back up to the surface without pulling the chute under, she could get some air into her lungs.

She kicked her feet and carefully guided her body up the cords to the broken ice above. When her head broke the surface of the lake, she took a sharp intake of frozen air and coughed violently. The eerie shrieks and yells of other crossers caught in the ice could be heard. She looked all around to see if anyone was near her. She couldn't see anybody.

Sierra's body felt heavy and frozen. Cold was a long time ago. She was simply an ice cube bobbing up and down in an enormous punch bowl. But, she was alive, for now. She had to get out and make her way to the town if there was to be any hope in surviving this.

Her chute was caught on some kind of formation of ice. She pulled on it gently hoping it wouldn't pull free. If she could just get up on top of the lake, she would walk to the pick up zone.

She struggled to put her elbows on the ice to boost herself up, only to have it break under her weight. She inched forward and tried again. The thin ice broke again as she tried to pull herself up on top, so she continued to inch toward shore. The ice was getting thicker, but not thick

enough. She had to disconnect her parachute from her harness because it held her back. She didn't have anything to grab onto in an effort to try and get up on the ice; the only thing she could do was continue with the slow process of breaking the ice and pushing forward.

Staying afloat wasn't a problem thanks to her bubble coat. Staying awake was another story. Her body didn't seem to be cold anymore, in fact, she felt warm almost hot. Yet, the water on her face and hat had frozen to a thin layer of ice.

She noticed the yells and screams had subsided. Her kicking was all but a stand still now and she felt so tired and lethargic, but was close to the bank of the lake. Her foot struck something hard.

It was the ground; she'd reached the shallow depths. Now if only she could get up on the ice. She was so weak, so tired. If she could just rest a little first, then she'd have enough strength to get out of the lake. The last thought that crossed her mind before she slipped into unconsciousness was of her father. He had a smile on his face.

## Chapter 2

Paul Bronson drove his Datsun through the streets of Slaterville with his palm beating the steering wheel in time to the song on the radio. The roads were snow covered and

slick as the blizzard raged on. He let out a compassionate 'ooh' as he passed a vehicle that had slid off the road and into the gutter. However, he didn't stop because a tow truck had arrived. The tune on the radio blared out *Another one bites the dust* by Queen and Paul chuckled at the irony of it all.

He directed his focus back to the task at hand; looking for orange bandannas. Not just any orange, fluorescent orange and it would be tied to someone's arm; the sign of a crosser. He had already picked up four, all male, and delivered them to his family's home. They still had room for two more if he could find anyone else.

Paul lived with his parents, his older brother Sam and his grandmother on his father's side. His family operated a crosser home and crosser season had just begun. The moment the lake froze, they came in swarms. They always arrived under the cover of darkness, and usually on the coldest, wintry nights.

He had been told earlier in the day a plane would be coming that night and his mood headed south. All throughout the winter months his life centered on crossers; pick up the crossers, shop for the crossers, drive the crossers to Northtown. Pick up more crossers. He was tired of it. He was almost twenty years old and wishing, very much, to get out of the house. Wishing to get out of the life.

“When does it end?” Paul recently had a conversation his mother, Elsie, where he expressed his frustrations. “When will they stop coming? When do we get to live a normal life?”

“Shame on you!” Elsie slapped his cheek, not too hard, but enough that he got the message. “The least we can do for those poor unfortunate souls is offer them aid. Without us, they would die in that Godforsaken country.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She exhaled and looked at the floor. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t expect you to feel the same way as your father and I do. You have every right to choose the direction your life will go and if you want something different for yourself. The world doesn’t stop spinning because of one country’s atrocities nor should you. We choose to help the defectors but that doesn’t have to be your choice.”

“Everyone in this family has helped crossers. If I choose not to, then I’ll be looked down upon, won’t I?”

“No, sweetheart.” Paul had a soft spot for his mother and he loved it when she called him sweetheart. But at this moment he felt she was placating him. “Paul, you shouldn’t do something you don’t want to do. If your heart isn’t in it, you cannot effectively protect a crosser.”

“I understand. I also understand that without larger

responsibilities, I won't ever be able to make an informed decision."

"And yet, until your heart is in it, we can't give you larger responsibilities. I don't mean to pressure you, and I'm certainly not trying to push you out of the house, but have you considered college?"

"Mom," Paul rolled his eyes and shifted on his feet in annoyance.

"No worries, you are always welcome to stay here and continue working in the capacity you've always done."

"Errand runner and crosser-picker-upper, I know. I don't plan on leaving any time soon."

"Take your time. Sam didn't decide till two years ago and he's twenty six."

Paul knew better than to complain anymore, but it didn't stop him from wishing for a different life, something more normal like Greg's from next door. Greg Bidell's family had been their neighbors for upwards of ten years. Greg and Paul were the same age and they hit it off right away when Greg moved in.

When Greg told him his family was going to start housing crossers a few years back, Paul opened up and told him they already did. Up to that point, Paul had only

been allowed to tell Greg they ran a Bed & Breakfast.

There seemed to be a unique kind of trust between the two and it gave Paul the support he needed in his out of control world where his life didn't seem to be his own.

Greg was the only person who seemed to understand Paul's situation and frustrations. Paul couldn't gripe to his parents about feeling useless or they'd just tell him he performed many useful tasks. He couldn't talk to his older brother Sam about his worries of being unprepared for his approaching adulthood without being chided about being immature and selfish. He only had Greg to unload on and Greg was always a good listener.

But Greg also made him think. He would point out to Paul that there was some kind of invisible force which kept him and Sam in the home and not out pursuing life. Of course, Paul wasn't old enough to do so, but Sam on the other hand was. Was there a force, as Greg had said, holding them there? Was it guilt? Was it respect?

Paul and Greg often talked about their futures. They both wanted to get away from Slaterville and the gloom and doom abounding there. They wanted to go as far north as they could and attend one of the many universities up there. Maybe become doctors or lawyers, anything to denote a real life. It was merely dreaming out loud though as neither one of them was ready to embark on their own lives.

Tonight, Paul's life involved locating and picking up crossers. He drove slowly along the road looking down to the edge of the iced over Slater Lake. It was quite dark but the street lights illuminated things adequately. Then he saw it. The orange bandana on the ice, well, attached to someone who was on the ice.

He stopped his car and got out. Looking from his viewpoint, he saw the person was submerged in the ice up to his armpits. He couldn't see a face, only a heavy wool cap with earflaps. The blowing snow made it extremely difficult to see much of anything. He quickly went around to the back of his Datsun and retrieved a rope and an axe. He tied the rope to the front bumper and ran down to the lake's edge.

“Hello there. Are you OK?”

Nothing. He quickly secured the rope around his waist and stepped out on the ice. It was stable. He needed to go out about fifteen feet to get to the crosser. He took another step and heard the cracking of the ice under his one hundred fifty pounds, so he lay down and belly crawled to the person. He thought he heard a moan coming from the crosser and hoped there was still time to save this one. He took the axe and tenderly broke the ice around the crosser and then heaved and pulled. As the body came up and out of the lake, the ice cracked underneath again.



Paul knew the water wasn't deep here, but the last thing he wanted to do was go under. His corduroy pants would surely weigh him to the bottom of Slater Lake. He inched backwards and tried it all again. Slowly but surely, he was able to extract the defector from the lake.

The crosser's coat was large and firm. He'd expected him to be heavy due to the size he was seeing, however, when he braced his legs to lift the individual, he was surprised at how light this one was. Maybe one hundred ten pounds dressed down; a small man, perhaps a teenager, possibly female. He'd find out soon enough. He picked up the unconscious person fireman style and carried him up to his vehicle. His home was actually just a little way down the road but he would still drive there verses carrying the crosser.

When he arrived home, he ran inside the house to get his mother. "I've got another one! This one's frozen and unconscious. I need your help." Elsie followed him outside and grimaced.

"Paul, Sam just brought in two more. We don't have room for this one. All the cots are taken."

"Why was Sam out picking up crossers? That's my job."

"There was word most of them were dying in the lake. I

sent him out.”

“You should have told me you didn’t think I could do my job well enough, you know.” Bitterness and anger ripped through him.

“We’re out of room, Paul.”

“I can’t very well put him back where I found him!”

“Maybe your father can call over to the Bidell’s to see if they have room for one.”

“No! We can put this one in my bed. This one will be my crosser.”

“Paul,” her concern was obvious in the tone of her voice, “you are not trained to care for crossers.”

“You can teach me; on the job training.” He smiled hoping his mother would give him a chance. No way was Sam going to take over his responsibilities and no way was Paul going to take this crosser anywhere else. His mother stared at him for what seemed like an eternity, no doubt she was wondering about his competence as a protector.

“Ok, let’s go,” she said unexpectedly. She helped him haul the light weight crosser into the house. They entered through the back door and into the kitchen. Normally, they would help the crosser down the stairs to the specially

designed room, but not this time.

Paul and Elsie carried the lightweight crosser through the swinging door and into the dining room, then across the living room to Paul's bedroom door. Paul pushed it open with his backside and they carefully laid the frozen stiff person on the hardwood floor.

"Get those clothes off quickly. I'll get some warm blankets." Elsie instructed as she left the room.

It still bothered Paul that Sam had been out picking up crossers. Sam was supposed to care for the crossers Paul brought home. What did they need Paul for if Sam could both pick up and care for the crossers? Did everyone feel like he couldn't handle the job? He'd show them he was ready to handle larger responsibilities beginning with the frozen crosser in front of him.

Crossers came in layers, clothing layers that is. A crosser didn't have a suitcase. They simply wore all of the clothing they were bringing, layer upon layer. It also helped to keep them warm in the fringed temperatures. Unless they fell through the ice and got wet, in which case, it could be the death of them. Multiple layers of wet clothing weighed a tremendous amount.

Paul had a small portable heater blowing warm air on the frozen unfortunate soul. He removed the hiking boots

and three pairs of socks. He unzipped the large puffy coat and noticed the inside of the coat had an inserted lining of inflated baggies. Some contained items such as photographs, documents and small heirlooms while others were empty.

“Clever,” he mumbled out loud.

He eased each arm out of the coat carefully and noted the thin diameter of each. He reached up to untie the strings of the bulky hat. His peripheral vision noticed mounds under the shirt and his brain was a tad bit slow in realizing he was seeing breasts. He removed the hat and was stunned to find loads of long dark blonde hair under it, wet of course, and the realization of what he'd gotten himself into hit him in the gut like a sledgehammer.

A girl. Not any older than himself, he presumed. He noticed her facial features right off. Perfect. Beautiful, even toned skin, thick eye lashes resting on top of her high set cheekbones. Light brown brows perfectly shaped with an arch more toward the last third. The shapes of her lips in her unconscious state were uniform and perfect. She had layers of long hair and a small amount of bangs with the total length probably hitting the center of her back. She seemed to be on the thin side as her face had just a hint of sharp lines. None the less, she was stunning.

His mother came in with warm blankets. “What’s taking

you so long? Oh! My, she's young." She was taken aback just like Paul. "Well, get on with it, Paul, she's dying on you." Then as quick as she entered the room, she left.

Paul came back to his senses and began removing her pants. One wet pair at a time. At least she was only wearing two pair. But the second pair was harder to remove. They wouldn't come off her slender hips without bringing her panties with them. He fought by holding the elastic band of the panties with one hand and pulling the waistband of the pants down, inch by inch.

Then he covered her legs with a warm blanket but not before noticing the well-toned shape of them and the bruises. Bruises everywhere in all the assorted colors; dark blue and purple, and yellow and green. He knew those to be the older bruises. He scooted up to remove her shirts. Buttons were kind of good except they took too much time to undo; they were still better than tee-shirts. As luck would have it, she had one of those on too, and naturally it was the last one to come off. He left her wet bra on and covered her with another warm blanket. Then he scooped up her freezing cold body and laid her on the bed.

He covered her with more warm blankets and tucked them all around her body. Elsie came back in and saw what he was doing. "No, Paul, blankets won't be enough. She needs body heat."

Paul looked at her quickly and was shocked at what she was implying. "I'm not going to do that." He'd learned long ago the best way to warm a hypothermic person was with another warm body, flesh on flesh.

"She could die."

"You want me to lay naked next to a total stranger?"

"You wanted this, Paul. It's either you or I'll get Sam to do it. Body heat is the only thing that will save her." Elsie could get him to do anything by simply threatening to have his older brother do it instead. She sure had Paul's number.

"Hmmpf. I'll do it." He took off everything except his briefs and climbed into bed with her.

His mother stood right by the bed issuing orders. "Put your arm around her."

"Mom!"

"Turn her on her side and spoon."

"Mom! Do you have to stand there and tell me how to cuddle? This is embarrassing enough as it is!"

"This is not about you! It is the difference between life and death, Paul. You want to learn how to care for crossers? This is step one; don't let your crosser die of

hypothermia.”

“Could you just leave, maybe, and let me do this without the awkwardness of my mother supervising?”

“Alright.”

Elsie walked to the door as Paul rolled her on her side. He saw the tremendous amounts of scars and lashings on her back. “Mom, wait, look at this!”

Elsie came back to the bed and leaned over to examine the injuries. “Oh dear. How horrible! What a revolting, awful...why, she must not be more than eighteen, from the looks of the scars; I'd say she's been whipped for months. She has fresh wounds across old scars.” She reached forward and ran her finger over an old scar. “This is just sickening. I hope she makes it through this so we can find out what happened to her.”

“Yeah,” Paul's throat choked out.

His mother left to go place more blankets in the dryer to warm. Paul looked a little longer at the scars and a deep pity filled his soul. Who would do such a thing to a young, beautiful girl? Her face was unmarked, he'd noticed, but her back and legs were in horrible shape.

Then a different thought entered his mind. This girl must be a strong individual to withstand this kind of treatment.

Clearly she didn't like the abusive life she had over there and that's why she boarded the crosser plane to flee. If he hadn't found her in the lake, she would have died. Of course, he didn't know for a fact she still wouldn't die of hypothermia.

Paul lay down on his side and conformed his body to fit hers wrapping his arm around her to pull her close to him. She was frozen and it was hard for him to deal with the coldness of her skin. But he knew his body heat was what she needed right now.

His mother kept bringing warm blankets in every fifteen minutes and switching them out. After a few hours, the girl started to have shiver fits. They would come on all of a sudden and were violent and then they were gone. Paul's mother told him it was a good sign. She was warming up.

Paul knew he would normally be over heated with all the freshly warmed blankets his mother kept piling on, but having an ice cube to cuddle up to kept him the perfect temperature.

By six in the morning, her temperature had reached 94F. It would take the better part of the day to get her up to 98F, his mother had told him.

"How are the other crossers?" Paul asked.

"Fine. This one is in the most critical state, ironically,



and you're not even trained to handle crossers. Apparently, crossers were landing on top of one another and using others to get up on the ice. It is upsetting beyond measure to know people can be driven to the extreme because of one loathsome man."

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Reginald Rawlings opened his eyes to the ringing of his phone next to the bed. The bright morning sunlight hit his eyes making him squint as another nausea wave rolled through his body.

"What," he muttered.

Dr. Roth from the palace infirmary was on the other end, "Pardon my call so early, but I need to alert you to Sierra's disappearance." Dr. Roth didn't sound like he was in any better shape.

"Disappearance! What are you talking about?" Reginald sat up and his voice thundered into the phone as he spoke with Dr. Roth.

"She's gone, sir. I never left the infirmary last night because of all the many individuals continually coming in sick. I, myself, became ill. I decided to rest on one of the exam beds. She was there when I went to sleep and gone when I woke up."

“I thought you said her strength wasn’t sufficient for her to attempt any kind of escape.”

“She has been on intravenous fluids for one week what with her effort to starve herself. She was so weak she couldn’t lift her own head. I feared if she came down with whatever we’d all caught, she’d die. I’m thinking the sickness came from the food. I’m sorry sir, but she seems to have slipped through the cracks.”

Reginald hung up the phone. Damn girl would be the death of him. “Get me Victor,” he ordered his personal aid to action.

Moments later, Victor appeared in his father’s room. “You asked to see me?” Victor still had a green tinge to his skin and looked as if he wasn’t done being sick.

“When was the last time you saw Sierra?”

“Yesterday, why?”

“She’s gone.”

“Where?”

“She’s. Gone. Victor!” He said slowly to his son. “She’s missing.”

“I’ll ask Riley. He stayed in a guest room last night

'cause he didn't feel well enough to drive."

"Go find her. You know how important she is to us."

"Yes, father, I do. I'll find her."

Reginald picked up the phone and put the order out to close the border, even though he knew she would already be across it. Reginald knew she would've fled to Baylend because she didn't have any more relatives in Rendier. They would need to start the search over there.

Victor stumbled into Riley's room and found him sleeping beside the toilet in his bathroom. "Wake up! Where's Sierra?"

"Huh?" Riley mumbled.

"She's disappeared. Do you know where she is?"

"What? No. Are you sure she isn't somewhere in the palace?"

"They are searching as we speak, but everyone seems to be moving in slow motion from this illness."

Riley sat up quickly and threw up into the toilet. Victor left the room before he joined him.

"Where'd you go, Sierra?" Victor said to no one as he

looked out the window feeling incredibly peeved for being fooled by a girl.

## Chapter 3

The sun peeked over the tips of the tall mountains and lightened up the sky. Sierra's senses came back to her one at a time. Her sense of smell had been first as she became aware of the delicious aromas filling her nose. Hearing came next, but all she could hear was silence. She could feel the soft warm bed under her with the mound of blankets over her. She knew she was lying on her side with something heavy and warm draped over her waist. She opened her eyes and saw a wall, pale white and basically plain. A clock sat on an end table beside the bed showing 7:58am.

She didn't remember how she came to be in this bed or how she got out of the lake, but she was fairly certain she was alive and not dead.

A cold shiver ran through her body confirming to her she was definitely alive and cold. To her alarm, the heavy warm object on her waist moved! She lifted the mass of blankets and looked under to find she only wore her panties and bra and an arm draped over her waist. She immediately became aware her back was warm, although she couldn't feel anything touching her.

Her heart rate tripled. She had no memory of anything that may or may not have happened. She'd heard of bad dealings with the crosser homes, how people had suffered worse fates after leaving Rendier. She'd wondered how much of that had been lies just to scare people away from the idea of crossing. But now, as she lay in a bed almost naked and from the looks of the hairy arm draped over her, a man lying beside her, her panic turned to anger. Anger at herself, anger at the man who felt he could take liberties while she was unconscious.

She kicked, wiggled, screamed, and flailed her arms to free herself from the many layers of blankets. Her sudden outburst and struggle awoke her bedmate. He tried to calm her down but not trying to keep her in bed. He had his hands raised with his palms out and his fingers splayed to show his sincerity.

"Hey, calm down," he said to her.

"Get away f-from me!" She stumbled out of the bed and went down, all the way to the floor as pain ripped through her ankle and foot.

Paul jumped out of the bed to help her. She sat on the floor, curled up in a ball holding her knee close to her chest and wincing with pain. Her body shivered uncontrollably.

He approached her.

“St-tay away f-from me!” Her shivers and chattering teeth made it difficult to speak. She stretched one of her arms forward to stop his progression with the other still clutching her bent leg close to her chest.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He stepped closer.

She wiggled a few millimeters away from him. “Where am I and why am I undressed? What did you do to me? And wh-who are you?” She couldn’t spit the questions out fast enough.

He smiled and sat down on the floor at arms length away from her. It slightly upset him that her presumptions of him were evil. “You’re in Baylend. You were on the crosser plane last night, remember? I picked you up and brought you to my house. You were frozen to the bone. I had to...I was only warming you up with my body heat.”

She looked back at him nervously trying to figure out what he was going to do next. She knew she couldn’t run away. She didn’t know where she was and something was wrong with her foot.

“Nothing happened, I swear. My name is Paul. Are you hurt?”

“What kind of question is th-that, Paul? Of course I’m hurt!” Anger flashed in her beautiful hazel eyes Paul saw for the first time. The color bordered more toward the green

side of hazel with a brown definitive border around the edge of her irises. Her perfectly shaped eyebrows he'd admired in their relaxed state were angled in anger, and after having slept with wet hair her locks were kinked in disarray and flopped forward over one shoulder. She had a soul full of determined fire, dangerous fire. But he figured as much the night before when he'd viewed her markings all over her body. He looked at her legs again with the morning light spilling over them and a tight knot formed in his stomach.

Paul realized she must be feeling vulnerable and in danger due to her nakedness so he reached up on the bed and grabbed a blanket and laid it on her. He got up and walked away from her to the dresser taking out a pair of jogging pants and putting them on. Then he pulled out an oversized tee shirt and tossed it to her.

The shirt landed on her head and she removed it off of her face. She looked at him with confusion. What was he playing at?

"Well, put it on. Clearly you're worried I'm going to take advantage of you in your helpless state. So, cover up so you can think straight." He knew he sounded gruff, but he felt his actions were necessary for her to relax.

She watched him leave the room and she hurried and pulled the shirt on before he came back. She tried to stand

up but her foot had her hopping toward the bed as she tried to keep her balance. She tumbled on the bed shivering and whimpering in pain. She could hear voices from outside the door. In walked Paul and an older woman.

“Nice to see you awake and alert, honey, how do you feel?” the woman asked.

“My foot hurts.” Sierra admired the woman’s beautiful features and short wavy brown hair. She stood several inches shorter than the male next to her.

“Any other pain?” the woman followed up with.

“Minor stuff, nothing bad.”

“Are you hungry?”

Sierra nodded her head.

Paul left the room and returned right away with a tray of food. It must have been set outside the door. He brought it over to her and the woman helped her scoot up into the bed properly. He placed the tray in her lap and stood up straight and looked at her.

He still wasn’t wearing a shirt, just the jogging pants. He was lean and trim with good muscle tone and broad shoulders. As she looked closer at his face, she could see he wasn’t very old like she had originally thought; probably



early twenties, maybe younger, and exceptionally good looking. Victor and Riley had nothing on this guy.

He had dark brown hair, slightly bushy with matching thick eyebrows. His eyes were the kind a girl could drown in; dark brown, almost black. He had a perfectly straight narrow nose with just the right amount of bridge and small indent at the tip. The ridges and valley between his nose and top lip helped shape his mesmerizing mouth. The lower lip was plump and the upper one thin with the shape of an 'm'. His cheekbones weren't extremely prominent but were high set elongating his cheeks down to a crisp jaw line shadowed with a slight amount of dark stubble. His light skin tone accentuated his dark features even further. The combination resulted in perfection. Plain and simple, Paul was gorgeous and just looking at him made her mouth go dry.

“What would you like us to call you, honey?”

“Hmm?” She pulled her eyes off Paul and tried to swallow.

“Is there a name you would like us to call you?” Paul asked her with a soothing tone in his voice.

“Sara.”

“Ok, Sara, this is my mother Elsie.”

“We will step out and let you eat your breakfast.” Elsie ushered Paul out the door.

Sierra had not planned to use the name ‘Sara’, it just fell out of her mouth when he asked. She wished she had used a different name like Amy or Lisa and not one so similar to her real name, but her mind turned mushy after her in depth appraisal of Paul. As she thought about it now, the name ‘Sara’ would symbolize a change in her life. This was what she was trying to do; change her life, changing her future. Her mind went back to her father. He was always full of one line deep thoughts with significant meaning like ‘you can’t change the past,’ or, ‘living in the past makes you miss the present and therefore sets up a bad future,’ but her favorite was ‘stop should-ing all over yourself.’

She looked at the warm plate of food in front of her and stopped for a moment to appreciate the fact she was alive, she had survived the jump and her future was now in her own hands and not the Rawlings’. She tied into the food Paul had presented to her; some type of a warm cream sauce over scrambled eggs, toast and fried potatoes with milk to drink. She was so grateful for the meal and it really hit the spot. By the time she finished, her foot ached and she wished Paul and Elsie would come back in.

While she waited, she looked around the bedroom in a more scrutinizing manner. The wall to her left had the door, a dresser and double doors she assumed to be the closet.

The connecting wall at the foot of the bed was just a simple solid white wall. There was a window on the wall to her right down at the corner at the end of the bed and enough room for a cushioned arm chair in the corner. A simple white valance stretched across the top of the window with white sheers hanging to partially obstruct the view but allow light in. To her immediate right sat an end table with a matching table on the other side of the bed. A lamp with a popular sports team logo along with an alarm clock sat on her table. No pictures, no posters or other personalization to the room. The waxed dark hardwood floor completed the overall cool feel.

It took about thirty minutes before Paul came back. He knocked first and waited until she told him to come in. "Here, let me take that for you," he said leaning forward and taking the tray.

She launched into her apology. "I'm sorry for freaking out like that. It's only that I woke up and was so disoriented and..."

"Hey, it's ok. You don't need to apologize." Paul cracked a smile on one side of his mouth.

"Your other crossers probably don't give you this much trouble."

"I don't know. I've never done this before."

“Isn’t this a crosser home?”

“Yes, but I’m not...I’ve never taken care of...well, someone like you.” *Let alone a girl.*

“I don’t understand.”

“My job is to pick up crossers after a drop. I picked you up and brought you here. The other beds were already full and it was either take you somewhere else or put you in my own bed.”

She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. “I’ve been waiting and waiting for the plane to fly and they’ve been waiting for the ice to freeze. But it wasn’t frozen enough.” She looked out the window in a daze. “There was a bad storm last night.”

“Yeah, it was a total blizzard. They told me a plane was flying and I wondered who would fly through this mess. They must have some valuable cargo on board.”

“So, I must have made it to the road for you to find me, right?”

“No, I found you in the ice about fifteen feet out.”

Her eyes widened and her voice became soft. “I never got out of the lake?”

“Well, not on your own. But that’s my job, remember?”

“Thank you for saving me, and warming me. I understand cold wet clothes have to come off in order to get warm, I’ll be sure to thank your mother for undressing me to save my life.”

“Well, she... sort of... wasn’t the one who undressed you. I did.”

Her eyes opened up so much, Paul thought they might fall out if she was gently tapped on the back of the head.

“She was busy with the other crossers when I brought you here. I didn’t know we were full,” *thanks to my brother*, “and she was going to locate you to another crosser home but I told her I’d care for you.”

Sierra was becoming all sorts of nervous. Just when she thought this crosser home might be reputable, her mind was going in the other direction.

“Didn’t she find it wrong you’d be undressing me?”

“No offense, but you are just another crosser to us. You needed help, we gave it. Does it really matter who did what? You are alive aren’t you?”

She stared at him trying to decipher his words. They were impatient, curt and slightly rude. His eyebrows had

knit together in frustration and it worried her. Yes, they had helped her, to her knowledge she hadn't been further abused, plus they'd fed her. She realized she was over reacting.

“Should I have put you back where I found you when I learned there wasn't room for you here?”

“No, Paul. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me. I'm just a little confused is all.”

“Join the club, but you can rest assured I'm not an evil guy. I will protect you, not harm you like the other people in your life have already done.”

She stared at him, taking in his honesty. She believed he meant what he said and nodded to him that she understood.

“Look, I'm supposed to ask you about your payment.”

“Payment?”

“Well, you know money for us to take care of you?”

“Oh, right. Where are my clothes and my coat?”

“Why?”

“My payment. It's in my clothes.”

“Oh, then it was probably a bad thing we burned your clothes.”

“What!?”

“Just kidding,” he smiled and laughed. “They’re in the closet drying.”

“That’s not funny.”

Paul went to the closet and pulled out her coat. “I have to say, this baggie bubble coat was pretty smart. It probably saved your life.”

“Thanks.”

“Did someone recommend it?”

“No.”

“You didn’t want to sink in the water, so you made a life vest with baggies?”

“No, I didn’t know I’d break through the ice. It was more for padding, you know, to make me look bigger.”

“Well, it saved your life.” Paul lowered his voice and spoke in a more serious tone. “My father said they pulled twelve bodies from the lake this morning.”

Her mind went immediately to the plane ride. She could see the anxious faces of people just like her who only wanted freedom from tyranny. Her eyes watered as she realized she actually would have died if he hadn't pulled her out. "They only wanted freedom. I guess they got it."

Seeing her face blank out and turn to sorrow with tears filling her eyes was almost too much for him to watch. He didn't like seeing this kind of emotion on her face because it brought into sharp relief just how difficult her life had been in Rendier. He wanted to see her happy again or even spitting angry, as long as the anguished look on her face would disappear. This emotional roller-coaster was never spoken of by his parents or Sam. He wouldn't have volunteered to do this had he known how difficult it would be. Paul's voice was nearly a whisper, "Is everything so terrible in your country that death becomes freedom?"

"Yes." She wiped her eyes.

Paul handed the coat to her. She flipped it over and started ripping on the bottom hem. A large zipper bag slid out.

"How much?" she asked him clearing her throat.

"I, uh, don't know. How much you got?" He teased trying to lighten the mood, attempting to pull a smile back on her face.



“That’s not fair. Go ask your mother.” Once she said this, his own smile faded quickly and his mood changed. Then he left the room.

Sierra didn’t know what she’d said wrong, but clearly something had hit a nerve. He couldn’t possibly be upset because she wouldn’t tell him how much money she had with her, could he? He was a hard individual to read, but then again, it had only been an hour since she’d awoken in this strange place with a stranger cuddled up next to her.

Sierra unzipped the bag and glanced inside at the ten thousand dollars she’d brought with her. She hoped this stay would not cost much, she’d need some left over to start her new life with and this was all she had from her father’s life insurance.

Paul left the room and headed into the kitchen. Go ask your mother? She only saw him as a kid. Without even knowing him, she’d put him in the same position of insignificant household member his parents had him in. Would anyone ever see him as an adult? He was almost twenty, for crying out loud. He’d probably have to become a brain surgeon to be seen as competent. Even at that, if someone in his family needed a brain operation they probably wouldn’t consider him good enough and ask for another doctor.

He found his mother in the kitchen, “What’s our fee?”

“One hundred a week,” she recognized stress and anger in his expression. “Are you ok?”

“Just dandy,” he turned on his heel and walked back to his room. He told Sierra what the fee was. She pulled the money from her stash and handed it to him. He snatched it and left.

When Paul came back, he brought warm blankets and dumped them on the bed by Sierra. “There you go. These will get you warm again,” he folded his arms across his chest and leaned up against the dresser.

“Thank you,” she said.

“A doctor’s going to come look at your ankle, later. It might be broke.”

“Ok. What will happen then?”

“I don’t know. My father usually makes the arrangements at this point.”

Elsie came in and picked up on the tension immediately. This situation was worse than she’d thought. Paul’s arms were folded across his chest and his overall behavior buzzed with frustration. If Paul couldn’t nip his pride in the bud, she would have to pull the plug on his crosser. She walked over to Sierra and placed her hand on her forehead.

“You’re still cold, lift your tongue, dear.” Elsie rapidly waved a glass thermometer back and forth to bring the mercury level down. Sierra did as she was told and clamped down on the glass stick. Elsie turned to Paul, “What’s the matter?”

“What makes you think something’s the matter?”

Elsie looked back to Sierra, who looked at Paul with question in her eye. “Go tend to the dishes,” Elsie ordered Paul over her shoulder.

Sierra watched as his facial expression changed to completely irritated as he left the room. “I’m sorry,”

“Keep your mouth shut, dear. He’s never been responsible for a crosser before so you’ll have to be patient with him. Your health condition was far worse than any of the others and it made me nervous to place you with him. If you’d died, he would’ve blamed himself. I didn’t want to place that kind of a burden on him. His older brother, Sam, helped gather crossers last night and when Paul brought you home, we were already filled to our maximum. He insisted on placing you in his room, and that was before he knew you were a girl.” Elsie removed the thermometer and squinted at the mercury giving Sierra a chance to speak.

“I hope I didn’t offend him.”

“96F, better, but not completely. Neither of us knew your gender, dear. However, I don’t think it would’ve made a difference. Paul was determined to care for you. Not you, necessarily, but you as a crosser because he felt slighted by his brother and he can’t stand being bested by Sam. Don’t worry about Paul. He’s at his own crossroads. He needs to decide which way to turn, one direction leads to the life of helping crossers, the other leads to all else. I’ll have him bring in some warm soup and some ointment for your back,” Elsie said as she walked toward the door.

“Ointment?”

“Your back, dear, it looked very painful last night when he turned you on your side.”

Sierra’s face turned red and her cheeks burned. At least something was warm. The thought of Paul manhandling her in her unconscious state was embarrassing. It was even more awkward knowing they had seen all of her whip marks.

“Some ointment would be wonderful. Thank you,” she managed to get out.

Elsie entered the kitchen to find Paul emptying the dish drainer. “Paul, sit down. I need to talk to you.” She motioned to the table. “Look, Paul, you haven’t had many girlfriends and you’ve never housed crossers before. The combination

of inexperience with the added anger and frustration is probably too much for you to handle. Why don't I talk it over with your father about moving Sara somewhere else."

"No. I said I'd care for her and I will."

"Be careful this decision isn't being made simply to one up Sam or me for that matter."

"It's not."

"Alright, then you need to clear your head and get down to business. There is absolutely no room for egotism, pride or self pity when it comes to taking care of a crosser. Your personal dilemmas are dealt with in private and do not involve your crosser. Do you understand?" Paul's shocked face at her bluntness was answer enough. "We don't know anything about her yet. Where did she get all those injuries? Who's responsible? We don't know how much heat, if any, is on her head. This is information you need to get out of her and is step two of housing crossers." He'd already succeeded in step one.

"What is step three?"

"Keeping your relationship on a professional level." Elsie stood and walked over to the medicine cupboard and pulled out some ointment. "Crossers arrive and leave. Some make impressions on us while others are quickly forgotten. She will leave at some point, leave and probably

never to be seen or heard from again. You have to understand that, Paul.”

“I do.”

“Good then, I told her you’d bring in some ointment for her back. You’ll need to apply it for her but wait a moment until I warm up this broth. She is still cold and needs to continually fill her belly with warm liquids.”

“Thanks for understanding, Mom.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, “It’s what I do best.”

Paul entered the room holding a small tray with assorted items on it. “Supposed to put some goo on your back. Mom thought you might need some pain killer too.” He handed her a couple of pills and a glass of water.

She swallowed the medicine and he handed her a warm mug of broth. Sierra could see immediately his mood had lightened.

“Eat up.” He encouraged.

“But I’m not hungry. I just ate all that other food.”

“You need to keep warm fluids in your stomach to help warm you from the inside out.” He pulled the blanket off of

her pained foot and examined it closely. Then he uncovered the other foot to make comparisons.

“Your ankle is definitely swollen,” he gently ran a finger down the inside of her left ankle and she flinched, “did that hurt?”

“Sort of, it tickled more than hurt.”

“Can you move your foot at all?”

She tried to wiggle it but any movement brought pain. “It hurts too much.”

“I think it was already injured when I brought you here last night. Perhaps when you hit the ice, there’s no way you hurt it when you bolted out of bed this morning.”

“Yes, I think your right.” She sipped the broth, trying not to make the annoying slurpy sounds. “I’m pretty sure it’s broken.” The tension in the room between the two of them lingered like the morning fog off Slater Lake. “Look, Paul, I’m sorry if I said,”

“Forget about it.” He smiled at her as he covered her feet with the blanket. “Sara, what did you do in Rendier? Why did you have to cross?”

## Chapter 4

“Wow, you don’t waste any time do you?” she answered back.

“I have to find out how important you are. Got to know how much heat you’ll have on your head.”

“I am being forced to marry Victor Rawlings.”

“Who’s that? Is he related to Reginald Rawlings?”

“Yes, he’s his son.” Paul didn’t know who Victor was? Everyone knew who Victor was! At least that’s the way it was in Rendier.

Paul’s eyes opened wide and she could see white all around his irises. “You are supposed to marry the dictator’s son?”

“Yes.” Good, at least he realized the intensity of the situation.

“So when’s the big day?”

“In four days.”

“Smart of you to bolt, but how did you get all those marks on your back and the bruises on your legs?”

“I wasn’t as submissive as Reginald thought I should be, so he decided to teach me how to be.”



“Reginald Rawlings beat you?!” Paul couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Yes, quite a few times. I guess it’s a requirement to be submissive if you want to live in the palace.”

“Did it work?”

“What do you think? I’m here aren’t I?” She smiled at him and his heart melted making the knot in his stomach tightened even more. He cleared his throat because it suddenly felt thick and clearing it seemed to help. He took her mug and set it aside. “Here, sit up and I’ll put this stuff on your back.” He helped her sit forward.

He opened the tube and squirted a puddle into his hand. With his other hand, he lifted her shirt up. Her spine tightened at his impending touch. He figured she was bracing for the pain. His voice softened, “This looks like it hurts.”

“Not so much. The first time I was whipped, it hurt like... well, it was quite painful. The second time hurt terribly because the first stripes weren’t even healed yet. The third time and every time since, it’s just numb. Don’t get me wrong, it always brings tears to my eyes, but the pain doesn’t last for long anymore.” She tried to sound like it was no big deal, but inside she was nervous about the idea of Paul rubbing salve on her back. She didn’t want to show

weakness, but also didn't want to trust him just yet.

Paul was glad his face wasn't visible at the moment. His eyes were watered with pity and anger. He thought about the fuss he tends to make when he gets a decent bruise. One bruise or one cut. She had so many he couldn't count them all. Was she even able to sleep comfortably? He smoothed the ointment all over her back being extra careful with the more recent wounds. She seemed to relax by the time he finished.

"Can I ask you a dumb question?" He gently pulling her shirt back down into place.

"Fire away."

He stood and placed the ointment on his dresser top. "Why didn't you run sooner?"

"Well, for one thing, the lake needed to freeze, so I couldn't cross. I did try to leave several times but every attempt was unsuccessful. I didn't have a place I could hide; no one would take me in for fear of Reginald Rawlings's wrath coming down on them. Plus every time I got caught, the beating was even more brutal. So, out of self-preservation I decided to wait until everything was in place before I attempted to flee again. Of course the wedding was coming up way too fast and I didn't want to go through with it, needless to say, I was glad when I found out the

plane was leaving soon.”

“What would you have done if the plane didn’t leave in time to get you out of the wedding?”

“Whatever was necessary?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I would have made sure I never married Victor.”

“End your life?” He was astounded to hear her talk like that.

She looked down at her hands and worried the loose threads of the quilt. “Well, you make it sound so bad.”

“You were considering suicide?”

“If you think about it, getting on the plane and knowing I might die in the jump was a form of suicide, but it was better than staying in Rendier.” She brought her eyes up to his and sat up a little straighter as if her spirits were buoyed up with bravery. “I won’t have my children brought up by Victor Rawlings or his father. I lived in that terrible household for four months and I refuse to marry him. I’m smart enough to know I didn’t have a choice if I remained in Rendier. Please don’t judge me Paul.”

The look on his face was anger mixed with compassion. She didn't know what to say. They just looked at each other for five eternally long seconds.

"I'll be right back. Ring the bell if you need anything," he pointed to the little crystal bell on the tray.

"I've never seen anything like it before," Zachary, Paul's father, sat at the kitchen table with his wife, Elsie, and his mother, Martha, "and so soon after a drop."

"How many did you see?" Elsie asked.

"At least six cars. They stick out like sore thumbs, too. You'd think after all this time they'd try to disguise themselves a little better. Our methods have evolved over the years, but theirs have not."

"I prefer it that way. We always know what to expect," Elsie said.

"I agree," Martha added, "and because they do things the same as always, you were able to spot their earlier than normal presence."

"The question remains, who are they looking for? And why?" Zachary asked.

Martha said, "Sam has determined three of his six are from the insurgent underground. Two are businessmen and

the other one is a commercial air pilot. Sam figures the heat on their heads is minimal.”

Zachary added, “Minimal or not, we won’t let our guard down.”

“What about Paul’s crosser?” Martha asked Elsie.

“Nothing yet. She’s covered in bruises and scars, poor girl.”

The door to the kitchen opened and Paul walked in. “I know more about Sara,” Paul said as he sat down. She is supposed to marry Reginald Rawlings’s son in four days. Well, she’s being forced to marry him. Of course, she doesn’t want to. Reginald is responsible for all her injuries.”

“Oh dear, that’s not good, not good at all.” Elsie stood up and began pacing the kitchen. Her voice slightly elevated and panicked, “She’s who they’re looking for. We have to move her, she’s too hot, we’re risking too much.”

Paul’s father spoke up with alarm in his voice, “We can’t now. The heat is already on. She stays until further notice. We will store her belongings in the crawl space and she will need to hide down below if we are raided.”

“What if we’re raided?” Elsie asked. “They’ll be looking for trap doors and the one in Paul’s closet is too obvious.”

“I’ll do some camouflaging then. I believe we have more wood flooring slats in the shed. I can make it blend in with the existing wood work. We’ll keep blankets and warm clothing in a box down there, just in case.”

“And some food,” Elsie added.

“Nothing should be left in your room to indicate she’s here. If they suspect anything, they will tear this house apart looking for her.”

“No problem; my room already looks stark and empty as it is.”

Zachary summed up the situation with, “We all need to act as if nothing is out of the ordinary, yet with a protective thought to everyone’s safety. No heroics, or else we risk failure.” The last comment was directed to Paul.

Sierra lay in bed and concentrated on the swirls and splotches on the ceiling as Dr. Jensen inspected her foot. Earlier, Elsie brought in a pair of black spandex knee-length shorts to give her a little more modesty of which Sierra was grateful.

“I can’t be sure without an x-ray. If it’s broken, it would be a hairline fracture. I believe by wrapping it in a splint and keeping your weight off of it for a couple of weeks, it will heal no matter the extent of the damage.” Dr. Jensen, a middle-aged heavy set man with horn rimmed glasses,

began wrapping her ankle.

Sierra couldn't help but notice how similar Paul and his father looked. Paul stood by the dresser with his arms folded across his chest with a worried expression and a pursed mouth. Zachary sat next to Dr. Jensen with the same concerned look.

Zachary and Dr. Jensen exited the bedroom and walked into the kitchen. "What do I owe you?"

"Just the usual house call fee... Zachary, what happened to her? She has some pretty severe contusions on her calves I can tell aren't related to the ankle."

"She hurt her ankle skiing with Paul and refused to go to the hospital. Paul worried about her so I called you."

"Why won't she go to the hospital?"

"No insurance."

"Skiing doesn't explain her bruises."

"She's an active sports-minded girl."

"You know, sports minded people don't usually get hurt like that. I am a doctor, Zach, and I suspect her bruises are from abuse. Her ankle injury is from a fall. It's ok if you don't want to tell me anymore than that, just don't think of me as

an idiot. I think you're going to have to pay me a little more for my silence."

Zachary's head dropped.

"When I say pay me, I mean with a large plate of Elsie's cookies. They are worth more to me than any reward." He winked.

Zachary let out a breath and smiled. "You had me going there for a moment, Jensen."

"I would never turn your family in, you know that."

"I'm sorry for even thinking it."

"So, how about those cookies?" Dr. Jensen hinted and watched as Zachary filled a plate. "I'm sure all those dark windowed cars haven't escaped your attentions."

"I saw them."

"Any raids yet?"

"No."

"It's her, isn't it? They are after her, aren't they? I don't understand why you put your family in danger, Zachary. It certainly isn't for the money because I know what you charge crossers; you could be asking for so much more



and they would pay it. But I know you well enough to know that what you do is not for the money. I just don't understand what else it's all about."

"Rawlings ordered a hit. They killed my father, Jensen, but only because they missed their target; my mother."

"Are you kidding me? When did that happen? I've never heard that before."

"I was quite young. But it stuck with me so much that I've defied Rawlings ever since. I'll keep doing what I'm doing until I'm stopped."

"Someday, I want to hear more about your mother and father. But for now, I'll take these cookies with a better understanding of what drives you, Zachary." Dr. Jensen smiled and patted him on the back and left.

Zachary entered the room with all sorts of tools in hand. Paul told Sierra at one point what his father was doing, but Sierra had a hard time believing any camouflage carpentry could trick Reginald or Victor. Paul reassured her that his father knew what he was doing and not to worry.

Sierra wasn't worried, she had Paul to protect her. His masculine presence took the oxygen from her lungs. Since the confusion and awkward start of the morning, Paul had changed his whole demeanor and it wasn't necessarily a good thing. His change had her thinking about him

constantly and growing more and more attracted to him, if that was even possible.

“Alright, Paul, this should do the trick. By kicking this lever, the door drops down.” Zachary demonstrated and the trap door swung downward into the crawl space. “Once you are down, close the door and slide the latch from the underside to secure it. To close the door from up here, use this other lever.”

Paul looked at the floor of his closet in amazement. The trap door was invisible to the naked eye. It fit seamlessly into the hardwood floor planks looking as if it were part of the floor. The lever had brilliantly been installed on the side of the shelving unit directly above the trap door. Should a raid happen, Paul would be able to hide Sierra effectively.

Paul kicked the lever and quickly jumped down the hole and closed the door in a matter of two seconds. With an injured crosser in tow it would probably take a total of five seconds. Paul scanned the area under the house, noting the restricted head room and damp coolness of the dirt. His mother filled one corner with boxes and bags of clothing, bedding and non-perishable foods while his father worked on the craftsmanship of the door. Should they ever have to use the crawl space, it was well equipped to handle them for a couple of days if needs be.

To Paul, this new responsibility lightened his spirits and

put a damper on the itch to fly the coop. The need to make a life for himself, one that didn't include crossers, was soothed a bit due to the new renovations in his room and the girl in his bed. He couldn't wait to tell Greg. He'd finally been promoted to caregiver.

Caregiver to a beautiful girl.

"Paul, we're not going to sleep in the same bed tonight are we?" Sierra asked after everyone had left the room and they were alone.

In truth, Paul had already thought about this and it made his stomach churn with anticipation. Last night had been to keep her from dying. It was necessary and essential. Tonight, however, she was basically fine. Except for the occasional shivering and sore ankle, she'd recovered well from her splash in the drink.

"We have to. It would be too much of a give-a-way if we were raided and someone was asleep on the floor or couch. It would be obvious we had guests and our home would be torn apart."

"Are you raided often?"

"We've had a few. They've all been successful though."

"What do you mean?"

“None of our crossers were discovered.”

“How do you keep crossers hidden?”

“Downstairs, we have a room designed for crossers with six cots and access to a small bathroom plus a hidden doorway leading into a tunnel for escape. Every time we’ve been raided, the crossers have been moved just out of reach.”

She was looking down at her hands and in deep contemplation. Paul knew sleeping together was weighing heavy on her mind. It was going to be harder on him than on her, guaranteed. “Look, I’ll mind my manners tonight. You don’t have anything to worry about.” She looked up at him nervously. He changed the subject to get her mind off the subject, “Tell me about how you escaped the palace.”

She relaxed a bit. “Dr. Roth had been helping me all throughout my stay at the palace and it absolutely abhorred him to see how Reginald treated me. After being beaten so many times, I felt I would never be able to escape so I decided to starve myself. I became weaker and weaker and of course Reginald couldn’t stand to see me, the last Montgomery, slipping out of his reach. So, he ordered Dr. Roth to hook me up on IV’s and nourish my body against my will.”

“What do you mean, the last Montgomery?”

“I’m the last of my family line. The ousted Queen was from the Montgomery line and well liked by my people. Reginald felt the public would like him better if his son married a Montgomery. Anyway, Dr. Roth confided in me he knew of a plane that would be taking off with a load of crossers as soon as the lake froze. I would need to eat food and regain my strength if I wanted to be on it. He would continue to portray my condition to Reginald as ailing and poor in the hopes of delaying the wedding. Although, in the end, nothing would delay the wedding even if I was wheelchair bound. Dr. Roth told me when the plane was ready to fly he’d poison the evening meal and make everyone in the palace sick. Like a bad case of stomach flu. I’d hopefully be able to sneak out undetected. It worked. The gate wasn’t even guarded when I walked out.”

“What did he put the poison in?”

“Multiple things; the meat, bread, drink, and the desert had all been altered.”

“What did he use?”

“No idea. But it worked. I boarded the plane without incident.”

“So when was the last time you saw Reginald Rawlings?”

“Last night before dinner he came down to speak with

Dr. Roth about my condition. I tried to lie completely still as if my strength was long gone. I needed him to feel like I wasn't in any condition to flee."

"Do you think you're missed yet?"

"Probably. Not a day went by without Reginald looking in on me. It made me wonder about his reign. I think the threat of a coup is huge and the marriage was supposed to satisfy my people. Now that I'm gone, he'll have to figure out something else."

"Or more likely, he'll hunt for you like no other. Do you have any family living in Baylend?"

"No."

"What about any living in Rendier?"

"No. My father was killed a few months ago, that's when I was taken to the palace."

"Why was your father killed?"

"Because of me," her head fell forward and she played with her fingers a moment while regaining her composure, "because I said no to Victor's marriage proposal. My father died soon after, supposedly of a heart attack, and I was seized and taken to the palace to be forced to marry Victor."

“What about your mother?”

“She died when I was little. I don’t remember her much.”

“Any aunts or uncles?”

She shook her head.

“Grandparents?”

She shook her head again. Paul couldn’t fathom being absolutely alone in the world. His growing compassion for her increased another notch.

“Most of the people in Rendier are like me, family-less. It’s better that way.”

“How so?”

“Less worrying. Less grieving.”

Paul truly felt sorry for her. Paul had family surrounding him every day of every year; grandmother, aunts, uncles, and a brother along with his parents.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said and left the room. Why hadn’t he known this about Rendier before now? Clearly, his parents and Sam knew and that’s why they were devoted to helping crossers. Grandma had been helping crossers from the get go. She knew too. Why had it taken

Paul so long to understand and accept the true evil which resided a mere thirty miles to the south?

He found his father and relayed all the information she had told him. The part about the doctor poisoning the palace made Zachary's eyebrow shoot upward.

"If you hear the doorbell ring, I want you to scramble down that trap door. You hear? She's got a lot of heat on her head, Paul, and they're looking for her."

Paul nodded. "What about the cabin? Isn't this what we have it for?"

"For emergencies only; this isn't an emergency, yet. Go back to your room and hope the doorbell doesn't ring."

Paul grabbed a couple of fresh baked cookies on his way to his room. After entering his room, he handed Sierra a cookie with a smile.

"So what's the verdict? Are you sending me on my way?"

"No," he chuckled, "but if the doorbell rings, we're supposed to scurry down the hole." He motioned to the closet.

She took a small bite of her cookie, "Should we practice?"



“What? Going down the hole?” he asked. She nodded. “I don’t...well it couldn’t hurt, or maybe it will hurt, you at least. We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I think we should.” Seriousness flooded her face. Hurt ankle or not, she didn’t want to be captured.

He set his cookie down and said, “Alright, um, ding dong.” He made the doorbell sound. She quickly dropped her cookie and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She hopped and limped to the closet and he grabbed her arm to try to help.

“Just get the trap door, Paul.”

“Oh, right.” He fumbled with the lever and once the door dropped open he turned to her, “Do you want me to help you down? Or should I go down first?”

“Honestly, it’s a good thing were practicing this because if this were a real raid, I’d be captured.” She rolled her eyes, turned and hopped away.

“Where are you going?”

“Let’s start over.”

Paul closed the trap door and walked back over to the bed. “Maybe we should plan this out better. How about if

the doorbell rings, I run to the lever and drop myself down the hole and wait for you. You can sit down and put your feet in first and I'll ease you down to prevent you from hurting your foot."

"Yeah, that sounds good. Ding dong." She sounded off and they both jumped into action. She made it to the door just as he was ready to help her down. She sat down and dropped her feet in and her body at the same time. Her fluid action caught Paul off guard and he scrambled to catch her. His hands were grasping any part of her to try to slow her descent and his hands slid under her shirt and up her sides to her armpits. Her t-shirt was all bunched up across her chest. He flushed immediately but she remained calm.

"Close the door, Paul," she said to him.

She sat down on the dirt and pulled her shirt hem back down to where it belonged. Then she began rubbing her ankle through the splint.

Paul was instantly in front of her. "Did I hurt you?" He was still trying to get his mind off of her satin smooth skin.

"I'm alright. Let's do it again. That was too slow."

"You came down way too fast. I wasn't ready." They both got up and he opened the trap door. He climbed out and turned to help her. She stood on her good leg but the

bedroom floor level hit just at her shoulders and she didn't have the leverage to boost herself up and out.

"I can't get up." She looked sheepishly at Paul.

He reached under her arms and pulled her out of the hole. His feet slipped and he fell on his back with her landing on top of him with a thud. At least he kept her from hurting her ankle and his body made for a softer landing than the hard wood floor.

She lifted her head off his chest to look him in the face. The moment hung in the air, the clocks stopped, and the electricity crackled between them. The situation was hardly professional, but very enjoyable.

"Um, maybe you should boost me out of the hole first, next time," she said quietly still looking him in the face and lying on top of him.

"Yep, I was thinking the same thing. Wanna do it again?" he smiled with one side of his mouth.

"Yes." Why did he have to be so sexy? Did he realize how attracted she was to him? She didn't move from her position on top of him. She didn't want to.

In one swift movement, Paul placed one hand behind her head and the other on the small of her back and rolled. Instantly she was on the bottom now without bumping her

head and Paul had his weight rested on his elbows with his hands still under her and his legs at her side. His face directly above hers hovered for a moment while he looked deep into her eyes. Then he jumped up and held out his hands to help her up.

They were both breathing a little heavy as they took their positions on the bed.

“You forgot to close the trap door,” she pointed out breathlessly and he went over and closed it. He came back and sat down, but before he’d completely sat she made the doorbell sound.

“Ding Dong.” They both quickly and smoothly hustled over to the closet and he slipped down the hole. She sat and put in her feet and paused for only a half second till she felt his hands on her thighs. A sizzling buzz shot through her. She inched forward and he let his hands slide up to her waist, then he lowered her to the ground using his body as a supporting slide.

At least his hands didn’t lift her shirt, but this was much more exciting having her slide down his entire length to the dirt floor. He closed the door and sat down by her breathing heavily.

“Better?”

“Yes, much better,” she answered and looked over at

him. Her eyes met his and the earth stopped rotating. His eyes had a way of staring right into her soul. He would never hurt her, she could sense it.

Paul watched her face in the dim light of the crawl space. He watched her smile start with her eyes and progress down to her mouth. He had the incredible urge to kiss her but his mother's voice saying 'not professional' echoed in his mind.

He stood to put some distance between them and popped open the trap door again. This time he held her waist and boosted her up till her top half was up laying on the bedroom floor, then he meant to grab her legs and push them up and out, but his eyes were drawn to her perfectly rounded bottom positioned directly in front of him. He took a moment to appreciate the wondrous view and then grabbed her legs just above each knee and pushed her up the rest of the way. He jumped up and out of the hole to find her sitting on the floor by the closet with her arms wrapped around her knees pulling them up against her chest.

"That was definitely better on the way down and it's all we need to work on. Perfecting the way back out isn't s-so urgent." A shiver shot through her body.

"Are you cold?"

"Mmm hmm."

Paul reached over to the pile of blankets and grabbed a thick one. He scooted closer to her and draped it over her shoulders, snuggling it around her neck. This type of tender action was new and it shocked him at how easily it came.

Sierra thanked him and looked down at the floor. Anywhere but his eyes. All day long she'd been studying him, watching every nuance of his behavior. And all day long she'd been cataloging every thing about his appearance and actions in her mind. Like when he'd smile at her, his head would slightly tilt back and his eye lids would come down somewhat. His eyes had twinkle in them when he laughed and smile lines which extended out at the corners. Whenever he seemed worried, he'd pull his chin a fraction of an inch closer to his chest and worry creases between his eyebrows gave away his concern. His interested look had his eyebrows rising just a bit exposing his eyelids ever so minutely. Of course his level of excitement or nervousness could be measured by watching the frequency of his Adams apple bob up and down.

She hadn't seen what fear looked like yet.

One thing was for sure, she found it difficult to breathe when he studied her the same way.

"Well," he interrupted her thoughts, "have you had enough, or should we do it again?"

“I think we’ll be fine together.” She started to get up without losing her blanket off her shoulders and not putting any weight on her foot. Paul quickly came to her aid and lifted her up to a standing position where she now realized he was only a few inches taller than her but enough that she had to look upward slightly to see his eyes.

He had a hold of her elbows, balancing her as she stood on one foot and their eyes were locked on one another. His mind raced along with his heart and he swallowed hard in the attempt to get in control of his urges. Like the incredible urge to kiss her.

Instead, he turned away and helped her over to the bed.

His bobbing Adam’s apple had not gone unnoticed by Sierra. She sensed his attraction to her, it was in the very air. His physical strengths had been displayed through out their little practice session along with his weaknesses. She seemed to be his weakness.

After she was comfortable on the bed, he sat in the armchair with his elbow on the armrest and his hand massaging his cheek. “What kind of a man is Reginald’s son?”

“Victor? Terrible.”

“In what way?”

“In all ways. He’s selfish, cruel and unforgiving. He’ll make a horrible ruler someday.”

“Is he dangerous? You know, physically abusive?”

“I haven’t ever seen him pushed that far. Mostly he has his bodyguards do the threatening or fighting for him, so I guess that would make him quite wimpy. However, his guards do what he says. If he desires someone to be beaten to within an inch of their lives, they will be. I don’t think he himself would ever do much of the physical fighting.”

“Why bruise a knuckle, right?”

“Right,” she added.

“How old are you, Sara?”

She loved to hear the sound of his voice when it uttered her name, well, what he thought was her name. “Eighteen. What about you?”

“Nineteen, almost twenty.”

“How long has your family been helping crossers?”

“All my life,” he said on an exhale.

“You don’t sound thrilled about it.”



“I haven’t been given much responsibility with it. All I do is pick up crossers after a drop and run daily errands for the family.”

“I’d say that’s pretty heavy responsibility. If you hadn’t found me, I’d be...”

Paul leaned forward putting his elbows on his knees and resting his chin in his palms. He looked at her sitting in her relaxed position on his bed. His bed. Evening was approaching and a sleepless night loomed ahead. How would he be able to sleep with this beautiful girl next to him?

“Are you pondering whether or not you should have pulled me out of the ice?” she asked in a serious tone.

“No! No, not at all. I pulled a stranded crosser out of the ice because that’s what I do. I didn’t know who you were or what you were fleeing. I only knew you would die if I didn’t do something.”

She flinched at the word die, even though she’d resigned herself to the idea death was far better than staying in Rendier. “That’s good, because many more people will be fleeing my country and they will need your help. Reginald’s reign is a terrible ordeal but it will eventually come to an end. Then it will get even worse. Your family and the good they offer will always be needed. In

fact, I would love to be in the position to help crossers from my country. I just don't see how it will ever be possible."

"Oh, you never know."

"How many crosser homes are there in this town, Paul?"

"I honestly have no idea. But the numbers are dwindling from when I was a young boy. It might have a lot to do with the fact the border has tighter security and drop-off planes only bring crossers in the winter months. There aren't enough crossers to sustain the number of homes willing to care for them, you know, supply and demand. At the same time, we pick up as many as we can when they come, up to six, usually."

"More will come. The crossing methods will need to be refined to accommodate more defectors," Sierra said matter-of-factly. "A system should be established allowing year round crossing."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the door bell out in the living room. For one terrifying moment they looked at each other, and then they both sprung from their spots and bolted for the trap door. Like a well oiled machine, they executed the drill and were quickly hidden under the house with the door closed above them.

Neither one of them breathed. Paul still had his arm

around her giving her support as they crouched close together under the floorboards of the living room. They heard footsteps and muted voices and as the people walked above, light dust drifted from the underside of the boards.

She looked Paul in the eye with a silent prayer. His expression of absolute terror burned itself into her mind. Now she knew what fear looked like and it scared her more than she could have imagined.

The footsteps were walking toward Paul's door and they heard a heavy knock on his bedroom door. It opened and more footsteps entered his room. Sierra gasped and Paul wrapped both arms around her pulling her tight against his body as their eyes watched the trap door in horror.

The lever was pushed and the door dropped with a thud. Sierra pressed her face into Paul's chest and his arms wrapped around her even tighter. He half way swiveled to shield her from the opening. Their bodies trembled together.

## Chapter 5

"Paul?" His father's voice filled the crawl space, and then Zachary's face hung down through the hole.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Greg is here to see you. He’s in the living room.”

Paul let out a huge sigh of relief and let his head fall so that his mouth rested on the top of her head. He inhaled the sweet smell of her hair let his eyes close for a moment. She still had a death grip around his middle and his arms were wrapped tightly around her. He brought up one hand and placed it on the back of her head.

“It’s alright. Let’s go back up.” He felt her lessen her grip but she didn’t look up at him. He helped her toward the trap door and Zachary lifted her out of the hole. Once Paul was out of the hole and had closed the trapdoor, he brushed himself off. He glanced over at Sierra who sat on the bed with her head down, then opened his bedroom door just far enough to slip out and not expose his female guest to Greg.

Sierra lay back on the bed after Paul left the room. She didn’t want to see him leave. There was a certain security when she was with him. She felt it powerfully just a few moments ago.

Zachary remained with her and was looking out the window. “Any problems getting under the house?” he asked without looking at her.

“No. We practiced.”

He turned his gaze in her direction, “Really?” his eyebrow went up and Sierra saw further resemblance between father and son. Same brown hair, eyes, mouth, everything; the only difference was age.

“It was a good thing we did. The first try was a blunder.”

“You should know I’ve heard the search is on for you.” He turned his attentions back to the window and stared outside as if he might find something important.

The blood left her face and her breath stalled somewhere in her lower gut. She hadn’t even been here a full twenty-four hours and she was being hunted.

He continued, “No raids yet, they’re looking for sightings or tips first.”

“It scared me to be under the house. There’s no way out,” she said quietly.

“I know. I’ve been thinking about that, too. I’ll work on something else for you. Until then, you will probably have to spend a little time under there,” he nodded in the direction of the closet.

“Paul is a good protector.” Her simple statement reddened her cheeks. She could still feel his strong arms

wrapped firmly around her, smell his masculine scent and feel his body tremble with human fear.

Zachary looked at her and wondered about the importance of this young lady. She was definitely beautiful, but what was it about her Reginald Rawlings wanted so badly that he'd keep her locked up in the palace?

“Paul said the whole palace was poisoned.” He looked at her with his head tilted to the side. A look of question was in his eye.

She nodded.

“How?”

“The food, but I don't know with what. Dr. Roth is an extremely smart man. But he did tell me it wouldn't be detectable in blood samples.”

“He sounds like he's on our side,” he smiled but wondered in his mind how one person could pull something like that off. Something didn't add up in Zachary's mind. His attentions fell on the half eaten cookie on the bed. “Is that yours?”

Sierra picked up the cookie and looked at Zachary.

Zach's eyes went to the dresser top where Paul's half eaten cookie sat. “Two cookies equal two occupants in this

room. I'll need to talk to Paul about this. If this had been a raid, those would have tipped off your presence."

Sierra nodded her head in understanding.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Paul said as he closed his bedroom door behind him.

"Hey Paul,"

"Follow me into the kitchen." Paul motioned to the swinging door beyond the dining table. Paul needed a few moments to try to get his nerves under control. They both grabbed a couple cookies and Greg opened the fridge to retrieve the milk as comfortable as if he lived there. Paul took two cups out of the cupboard and sat at the table.

"Our home was raided early this morning," Greg said in a hushed whisper. "They were looking for a young girl. We picked up a male crosser last night but we only took one because of our remodeling. Did you guys get any new ones last night?"

"Seven."

"Whoa, you're not equipped to handle seven are you?"

"No. One's in my room." Paul had been told repeatedly not to tell anyone about the business, not even friends. Secrecy was the highest valued intangible item in the

house. It was that little nagging voice in the back of his mind which told him not to tell any details to his best friend.

“Any young girls?”

“Just men this time,” Paul lied and stuffed a cookie in his mouth.

“Oh. Well, don’t be surprised if you get raided too. They broke my Walkman while tearing through the place. It ticked me off. But what was really weird was they didn’t even seem to care we had a crosser in the home. They were only looking for the girl.”

“My father is already on guard for that.”

“So,” Greg took a big bite of his cookie, “do you want to hang out tonight? I hear there’s a new waitress at Sophie’s and she’s real cute. We could go check her out.”

“Sorry man, I have duties here.”

“They’ve got PacMan,” he tried to persuade his friend.

“I am actually in charge of my crosser, first one to be exact.”

“Moving up in the world are we?”

“Something like that.”



“Well, I better get going, wouldn’t want you slackin’ on your new job. See you around.” Greg said as he lightly punched Paul in the shoulder and left the kitchen through the back door.

Zachary stayed with Sierra until Paul came back. Paul walked in carrying two mugs of hot chocolate and handed one to Sierra. Zach took the cup from Sierra and faced Paul. “Paul, your inexperience will wind up resulting in her capture unless you start thinking more clearly. Two cookies, two mugs of cocoa indicate two individuals. Please, for both your sakes, use more caution.”

“Alright.” Paul’s head hung low as he berated himself. He hadn’t even thought about what it might look like to raiders.

Zachary left with the second cup, leaving Paul and Sierra to share one mug.

Sierra took the offered drink being careful not to touch his fingers. “What did your friend want?”

“He told me they were raided this morning looking for a young girl. I assume he meant you.”

“But your father said there weren’t any raids happening yet.”

“He did? Hmm. Maybe he doesn’t know about the raid

at Greg's house."

"Should you tell him?"

"I will." He sat in the armchair. Sierra noticed his worry creases forming. "You know, being down there was pretty intense. Wasn't it?"

Her eyes dropped to her mug. She answered back in a barely audible whisper, "Yes. Thank you for protecting me."

Paul rose quickly from his seat and turned his back to her while he looked out the window. "Well, I didn't really protect you. Not exactly. It was just my Dad, well, Greg I mean. So you don't need to thank me."

Sierra looked at his back wondering if she'd said something wrong. Maybe he thought her reaction in the crawl space was too childish. "Is something wrong, Paul?" He turned to look at her. His expression looked pained. She didn't know what to think, she didn't know what to say. She still trembled from the whole ordeal.

Paul walked over to the dresser and rubbed the back of his neck with both hands. He turned around and faced her. "When we were down there, I realized I've never been responsible for anyone other than myself. I wanted to run, I wanted to throw my hands up and say 'uncle', say 'alright I changed my mind, I don't want to care for a crosser'. But

you hugged me so tightly in your own fear and..." He sat down on the edge of the bed next to her feet. "I'm afraid I won't be able to protect you well enough. I'm not experienced with this kind of thing. Then my dad points out my lack of forethought and the fact I carelessly put you at risk."

Sierra couldn't believe he would open up so wholeheartedly. His eyes held fear of the unknown and something else she couldn't figure out. "I thought maybe you were thinking I'm...that I'm not worth the danger your family is in."

His eyebrows shot up in shock. "Sara, that's not at all what I think. I feel like I'm not the right person to be protecting you. If I don't do my job right, you could be captured and beaten by that S-O-B again. I can't let that happen to you because of my inexperience."

"You did an amazing job of protecting me, Paul. It's normal to be afraid. I think you're being too hard on yourself. When the trap door opened, you put yourself between me and the potential danger. If this is your first time protecting anyone, I'd say you have a natural ability."

He stood and walked over to the closet. "I didn't fully understand the enormity of your situation until we were in that position." Paul noticed dirt on the floor that had fallen off of their clothes. It definitely needed to be cleaned up. He turned to Sierra to see her eyes still glued to him. "I need to

get the broom and clean up this dirt. I'll be back."

Paul found his mother in the kitchen getting a casserole out of the oven. "Mom, do we have any extra rugs or carpet strips to place down in the...you know."

"You could take the bathmats for now and I'll get something picked up later. How's everything going? Your father told me he gave you quite a scare."

"Yeah. Maybe we should tell all our friends to use the back door and to not ring the bell. One heart attack a day is my limit."

"How did Sara handle it?"

"She was so scared. I felt bad for her."

"Well, that's understandable. You've seen her scars and bruises. You know what kind of pain she'd be in if she went back; both mental and physical."

"I know. Is dinner about ready?"

"Yes, I'll bring it to you. Hurry back, she shouldn't be left all alone in case someone else comes."

Paul returned to the room with the broom and cleaned up the dirt. Then he opened the trap door and climbed down to arrange the bath mats on the dirt. He also took a

thick blanket down and spread it out like he would for a picnic. This way, if they had to come down again, they would at least be able to sit down.

As he climbed up into the room, his mother was bringing in the food. He watched Sierra as she looked at the big pile of food on the one plate, along with one fork, knife and spoon and one large glass of milk. Her eyes met his and he smiled.

Elsie left the room and Paul asked, "Do you want the fork or the spoon?"

"Spoon."

"Do you want the top half or the bottom half of the milk?"

"Neither, I'll take the milk on the right side." She drew a vertical line down the center of the glass with her finger and smiled.

Paul smiled and laughed. Sierra loved the way his face transformed when he did. All pretenses vanish with wholesome laughter. No facades, no masks, no proud facial expressions. His eyes had smile lines and his teeth were straight and white. Smiling brought out his cheekbones and chin too.

They sat together on the bed and ate their meal. Sierra's mind wandered to the approaching night and the

uncomfortable feeling in her gut. It wasn't a negative feeling, more like an excited jitter. She looked at him sitting at her feet and remembered how wonderful it felt to be held protectively by his strong arms. She had absolutely no doubt in her mind he would do anything to keep her safe.

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The phone call for Reginald left him irritated. His 'eyes' in Baylend hadn't come up with anything yet. It aggravated him to hear a plane load of defectors had left the night before and no one at the airport seemed to know anything about it. And it irritated him to hear most of the defectors died in the frozen water of Slater Lake. She must have been on the plane, she had to have been. But did she survive? Would they have to drag the lake to confirm her death? She must have had connections with someone in Baylend to know when the plane was going to leave. It seemed a little too coincidental the wave of stomach flu swept the palace the same night she left.

"Get me Dr. Roth on the phone," he commanded his assistant. He'd get to the bottom of this with Dr. Roth's help.

"Dr. Roth here."

"I want to know what strain of virus or kind of contamination we are dealing with here," Reginald barked

out.

Dr. Roth breathed slowly and controlled. "I've been running blood tests on many of the staff along with my own blood. The same results keep coming up."

"And what is that?"

"Nothing. I'm not detecting any virus consistent with all blood samples, although Rhonda in the kitchen is pregnant and doesn't know it yet, but other than that, no foreign toxins or chemicals to indicate poison. However, there are a few additives which can be added to food to cause the intense stomach upset we experienced, yet would not show up in a blood sample. I'm still looking into it."

"Fine. John, you were sure Sierra was too weak to flee. How come you couldn't see her strength?"

"Sir, I've asked myself that at least a hundred times. How indeed? You saw her yourself, sir. Did she look like she could do summersaults and cartwheels to you?"

"No. She definitely pulled the wool over our eyes. Who has she been talking with while in your care?"

"She talked to everyone who came into the clinic, sir. I think I know where you are going with this; you think she had an informant. I'd like to point out she didn't eat any of the food last night. It's possible she knew something we

didn't. But my question is how do you even begin to root out the informant?"

"I want to know the name of every palace employee, guard, maid, butler, cook, chicken egg collector who did not get sick. That's where we'll start the investigation."

"I'll start making a list, sir."

Reginald hung up the phone and decided to put a halt to all night time flights out of the country. Any airplane trying to fly after dark would be shot down. End of story. Also, no one could know Sierra Montgomery had escaped the palace. If he had any hope of succeeding with this plan, Sierra had to appear as if she resided here on her own will.

Reginald didn't worry too much about damage control as he felt he had a firm hold on the media, what he did worry about was the impending wedding set to take place in three days without a bride.

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The rest of the evening played out uneventfully. Sierra slept most of it and Paul sat in the armchair watching her. He pondered his life prior to last night when he was driving around looking for crossers and feeling sorry for himself. He had actually wished he could have more responsibility, but now that he had it, he wasn't sure he wanted it.



Why is it we always want what we don't have, but once we get it we don't want it anymore? If he relinquished the responsibility of his crosser to someone else, what would happen to her? Would she be cared for properly? Would that person understand the severity of her situation? He doubted it. No, he would keep Sierra under his wing and do what needed to be done to protect her. Even sleep with her. Not in the romantic sense, but as her protector. He was her guardian and he planned on doing his job. He would protect her best by helping portray the appearance of only one occupant in his room.

Just before bedtime, Elsie and Martha came and helped her bathe. They reapplied salve to her back and rewrapped the splint on her leg. In the meantime, Paul sat out in the living room with his father going over the floor plans of the home.

“Paul, I'm going make an exit from your crawl space. I plan on digging under the foundation in the northeast corner and merging into the existing tunnel.” Zachary went on to explain the logistics of the engineering for the upcoming project utilizing his degree in Civil Engineering. Paul tried to listen and understand, but his mind kept wandering to Sierra. His father continued verbalizing his plan most likely for his own purposes and not so much for Paul's.

“How long do you think it will take to complete the digging?” Paul asked.

“Two to four days. Possibly a week if we experience a cave in. I plan on reinforcing the ceiling with boards as I go. The excavated dirt will be spread inside the crawl space and not hauled out.”

“Sounds good. Dad, did you know the Bidell’s were raided this morning?”

“No, did Greg tell you that?” his expression showed genuine surprise.

“Yes. He said they were looking for a young girl.”

“I didn’t ask the Bidell’s if they were raided. I assumed because of their remodeling project they wouldn’t be taking crossers right now.”

“He said they took in one man.”

“Hmm. Well, expect the worst then. Did you tell Greg we had a young girl?”

“No. I said we only had males, but I did tell him I have one in my room.”

“Paul, what have I told you about that?”

Immediately Paul regretted telling his father even that much. “I know, Dad. I didn’t tell him about the trap door or about Sara. Is it really that bad he knows we house

crossers just like they do?”

“They’re new to it. We aren’t. I am a naturally suspicious person, Paul. I don’t like it when others ask questions about our business. It makes me nervous.”

“It’s just Greg, Dad. He’s my friend, not some,”

“Paul, one thing I want you to learn is secrets told are never kept. If you have a secret and you never tell anyone, you never have to worry about the secret getting out. Let me give you an example. We’ve housed several of Reginald’s armed guards over the years and they let us in on some of the secret tactics he uses. When they think they’ve located the target house, they stake it out, bring the troops across the border and take it by storm in the early morning hours. Until the raid happens, though, the house is watched continually along with all the occupants. The roadblock officers have photos of all suspects, so fleeing isn’t an option once you see that your house is under surveillance.

“However, when the raid goes down, the house is surrounded and all focus is turned here, and that’s when we remove our crossers through the tunnel. When the focus is pinpointed on this house, we slide out of their grasp. By knowing the procedures we are able to continue to succeed where other homes fail; that and the fact we have a secret exit. The point is we were able to get the upper hand because of secrets being told.”

“Are you saying Greg is a spy?”

“No, I’m saying no one should be told how we do things here or it could give someone else the edge needed.”

“Are we under surveillance yet?” Paul asked his father in a bit of a frustrated voice.

“No. But the search is on.”

“Then why don’t we take her to the cabin now? The cabin road is within the roadblock perimeter, so we wouldn’t be identified.”

“Because the cabin is not a safe house, it’s the end of the road. The supplies are limited so a long term stay is impossible. The cabin is meant as a place to stop off on the way to Northtown. Once a raid is issued, the roadblocks are removed soon after, whether or not they find their target. Reginald’s army isn’t welcome here in Slaterville, but as long as they are only lingering, our police can’t really do anything about it. However, when they cross the line and execute a raid, they can all be arrested.”

Paul added, “So they must make sure their target is accurate before executing, right?”

“Right. Otherwise, it is for naught. But see, that is why our strategy works so well, we wait to move until they move. They storm our house and fail to find who they were looking

for, then quickly retreat across the border.”

“Why not just keep the crossers in the tunnel? You know, just out of reach. Why transport them during a raid?”

“Do you know how difficult it was to build that tunnel, Paul? It took many, many months and I will not have it all ruined because of some bodily function like coughing or sneezing. That’s all it would take and the tunnel would be discovered. No, our exit strategy works just fine.” “You know, Dad, it might be a good idea to stock the cabin better, perhaps several weeks’ worth of canned goods and changes of clothing. Medical supplies and a H-A-M radio would be good too. I know there’s a phone line already, but what if the line were cut for some reason. A radio would be better.”

“That’s a good idea, Paul. I think I’ll put you in charge of that once Sara has moved on.”

Paul felt a huge sense of satisfaction that his father trusted him with such a task. But the overwhelming understanding of the last part of his sentence was what really struck him; ‘Once Sara has moved on’.

Zachary, Elsie and Grandma Martha sat at the kitchen table and discussed the crossers. Zachary led the discussion. “No one can be moved until the heat dies down. Private investigators are combing the city and many of

Reginald Rawlings' men have been spotted too. A crosser plane is scheduled this weekend but I fear we will still be full."

Elsie's eyes worried. "No one on that plane will stand a chance of surviving. Reginald's men will capture them in the search for Sara."

Martha cut in, "I made some calls to my friends in Rendier. First of all, all night flights have been suspended and now Reginald's guards are posted at the airport twenty-four hours a day. There will be no flight this weekend. Crosser transportation will have to evolve, again. Secondly, Sara's real name is Sierra Montgomery. The story she told Paul is accurate so I don't believe her to be a spy." Martha picked up some papers and took a deep breath, "OK, the Montgomery's were a very influential family. You were both young when this happened, but thirty-two years ago when King Louis ruled, his Queen was a Montgomery. The southernmost province of Rendier was ruled by the Montgomery's and when King Louis chose his bride, he merged his title with their prominent name. Reginald clearly plans to do the same thing; merge his name with this influential family's history and strengthen his reign. By having Victor marry Sierra Montgomery, Reginald wins favor and trust with his people."

"She has relatives?" Zachary asked.

“Actually, no. When Alexandar Rawlings overthrew King Louis, most of the Montgomery’s were killed. Sierra’s father, Donald, cousin to the Queen, was a young man at the time and was spared. The older Montgomery’s were the targeted ones. The others have dropped off the map. Perhaps they’ve crossed into Bayland, or maybe they’ve been executed like Sierra’s father.”

“Oh dear,” Elsie exclaimed.

“Nevertheless, Sierra is a Montgomery and with that name, Reginald is hoping to restore faith in his people,” Martha said.

“Our son jumps head first into housing crossers and ends up with Princess Sierra. Reginald Rawlings isn’t going to stop till he finds her.” Elsie’s breathing had increased.

Zachary watched his wife as she’d put the details together and came up with the same dismal conclusion he already had. He changed the subject knowing it wouldn’t help the tension any but still it needed to be discussed. “I’m concerned about something Paul just told me. He said Greg’s house was raided this morning. Greg told him they were looking for a young female and he asked Paul if we took in any females. Paul said we only took in males this time.”

“It’s not true,” Martha said, “I spoke with Mrs. Bidell this afternoon and she said they didn’t pick anyone up because of their remodeling.”

“Why would Greg lie?” Elsie asked.

“It’s most definitely a lie, but why indeed?” Zachary asked.

“We’d better evacuate,” Elsie stammered out.

“No,” Zachary said firmly, “let’s assume for a moment the Bidell’s are spies working for Rawlings. They would be watching for persons of interest. Ms. Montgomery would definitely fall into that category. These other crossers are inconsequential to them. They wouldn’t blow their cover for a simpleton. Paul told Greg his crosser was male. If Greg was digging for info, he didn’t get it. It may be the reason we haven’t been questioned yet. We can’t evacuate. It would raise red flags.”

Elsie put her face in her hands as if her head hurt. “So, we stay put and pretend nothing is wrong or suspicious?”

“Yes. We’ll go ahead and try to find placements for all seven of our crossers, but no one leaves till the heat subsides.”

“And if we’re raided?” Martha asked.



“Then we follow protocol. I believe we should all assume the Bidell’s are not to be trusted. Zachary said to Martha, “Go update Sam. Oh and one more thing, we must all refer to Sierra as Sara, make sure Sam and Paul both understand this perfectly. One slipup could cost her her life.”  
*And all of ours, too.*

## Chapter 6

Paul lay still as stone on the bed. The awkwardness of the situation was far worse than he’d imagined it would be. After being down in the crawl space with Sierra and feeling her body crushed against his, he couldn’t get his mind off her.

Sierra on the other hand slept like a rock. Her exhausting day had taken its toll on her and she’d crashed after her bath.

Paul didn’t want to fall asleep for fear he would wake up in an awkward position or worse. He looked over at her sleeping form. The small amount of light spilling into the room danced across her face, highlighting her bone structure. Paul hadn’t ever seen a girl as beautiful as her. It was easy to see why Victor Rawlings wanted to marry her.

Sierra readjusted in her sleep and turned her head toward Paul. Their faces were mere inches apart. All he had to do was reach out with his hand and he could feel her

silky soft skin. It angered him once again to think about Reginald damaging her perfect skin.

The more Paul thought about her injuries, the more he realized that not once during the whole day did she complain about her back or legs. Her ankle had her wincing when she tried to walk on it, which she wasn't supposed to do, but other than that, if Paul hadn't actually seen the injuries, he wouldn't have believed she had them. How does someone block out pain like that? Paul was nothing short of amazed at the girl lying next to him.

Paul eventually fell asleep and awoke to the smell of bacon. Nothing quite like the smell of bacon; wakes the senses, clears the mind and makes the stomach growl. Paul heard the growl. He opened his eyes to see Sierra staring back at him.

“Good morning, Paul,” she smiled seductively.

Paul reasoned with himself. She probably didn't mean to send a seductive signal, he'd only read it as such. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. I've been awake for a little while.”

“You have? Why didn't you wake me up?”

“Sorry. I didn't think you would want me to.”

Paul sat up and stretched his back. He looked back over his shoulder at Sierra to see her eyes on him.

“Paul, did I do...anything or say...anything last night that made you uncomfortable?”

“No. Did I?”

“No.”

“Well, good. We survived our first real night together without injury or foul.”

“Right, that’s good.” She smiled. Her hair covered her pillow in wavy piles.

Paul stood and was walking to the bedroom door when he heard the doorbell ring. Sierra shot straight up and scooted off the bed. He had the trap door opened and had climbed down the hole before she made it to him. He helped her down and closed the door.

“Let’s sit over on the blanket.” He whispered and guided her over to it. He opened the box containing supplies and pulled out another blanket to wrap around her shoulders. They sat in silence listening to the mumbling voices above and watched as dust drifted to the ground under the footsteps.

“What a way to start the day,” she whispered.

He turned and looked at her with her beautiful curly bed head hair flying this way and that.

She added, "Maybe we should stay down here all day."

"I'm liking that idea a lot."

Little did they know, they would be scurrying down the hole several times that day. Zachary started digging on the tunnel to give them an escape route but had to stop every time the doorbell rang. Paul took turns with his father, letting him care for Sierra while Paul dug. After eight different trapdoor false alarms, Sierra demanded she remain down in the crawl space with them.

By the end of the day, Zachary and Paul had dug down under the foundation of the house and supported it with beams. The digging was much more exhausting than Paul thought it would be. The ground had many large rocks and whenever Paul tried to scoop up dirt, he'd hit another rock.

"I'd do better with a pick axe and a teaspoon, Dad."

"Hey, you're not telling me anything I didn't already know. I dug out the other tunnel."

"You have my sympathies."

"Yes, well, I was much younger and in good shape. I say

we hang it up for the day. We'll get back on it tomorrow."

Zachary, Elsie and Martha convened again in the kitchen after dinner.

"Ah, I'm not as young as I use to be," Zachary rubbed his shoulder.

"You should let Sam and Paul do all the work," Elsie sympathized.

"I'm the engineer; I need to be right there to avoid a cave in. Tell me about all the visitors we had today," Zachary directed to his wife.

"It was simply unbelievable. Every time the doorbell rang I had visions of Sara falling down the hole and hurting herself further. I suspect many of the people who came today were working for Reginald. None of them tried to enter the house, they only asked questions. One of them was supposedly selling vacuums and he wanted to come inside, but I turned him down. He asked many questions that I took to be probes. How many people in the home? How old is the home? He even wanted to see our current vacuum. I still think he was trying to fool me. No doubt about it, they are trying to find her. The funny thing is, no one is looking for the six men we have downstairs. If it wasn't for Sara and her heat, we could have shipped off the others."

"Mrs. Bidell talked to me over the fence as I put the

garbage out,” Martha said. “We only spoke about the weather and other commonplace topics. I didn’t feel like she was fishing for information.”

Elsie added hesitantly, “I noticed she likes Paul, a lot.”

“Mrs. Bidell?” Zachary asked.

“No, Sara.”

“Well, it’s to be expected. She’ll soon be on her way and things will be back to normal.” Zachary didn’t want to fuel the suspicions of a blooming romance, but he’d seen the way Paul and Sierra looked at one another while under the house.

“I hope so, for Paul’s sake. I don’t want his heart to be broken through all of this.”

“I think you should be more concerned about his neck. If Reginald gets a hold of him,”

“I know, Zach. I know,” Elsie said.

“Well, tomorrow will be productive. I’m hoping to reach the tunnel,” Zachary tried to lighten the mood. “The digging is going faster than I anticipated.”

Paul and Sierra lay in bed that night silently staring up at the ceiling.

“Paul, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why doesn’t your father just move me out of your home? Wouldn’t it be better than staying here putting everyone in danger?”

“There is too much heat right now.”

“I know. The heat would go away if I was gone.”

“No, it wouldn’t. It won’t go away till you’re captured. If we tried to move you, they’d find us. It’s actually better to let them zoom in on our home and raid us. Then we escape through the tunnel while all their eyes are on the home and hopefully get away, a diversion of sorts.”

“It sounds too risky.”

“It is, but we’ve done it before and it works. However, Sam is the one who handles the evacuations, not me.”

“Where does the tunnel lead?”

“Can’t tell you. When you come out of the tunnel, you’ll know where it leads.”

“What’s that, like some kind of a club or something?  
The tunnel club.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” He looked over at her and smiled. The strained tension that he felt when he looked at her curled his toes. He looked away back to the ceiling.

“Tomorrow, I plan to stay in the crawl space all day long,” she said.

“If it makes you feel safer,”

“I feel safe when I’m with you. If that’s where you will be, it’s where I want to be too.”

He looked at her again and saw she was completely serious. “Ok. Let’s get some sleep.”

“You don’t think they will raid us through the night?”

“Highly unlikely. They can’t track us down after dark as easily. They always raid in the daylight, often at the crack of dawn. Get some rest, Sara.” He rolled away so he wouldn’t have to look at her, so maybe the knot in his stomach would relax.

“Goodnight, Paul.” Sierra laid her head down on the pillow and stared at Paul’s back. He had changed in a matter of hours. In two days time she’d watched as he matured from boy to man. His sincerity toward her wasn’t masked or fake, it was genuine. Her father was the only other person to display this kind of trait. Paul reminded her



of her father and she knew without a doubt her father would've liked Paul.

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“Sir, may I have a moment with you?”

Reginald looked up from his papers, “Sit.”

General Steinman sat before Reginald with a nervousness which didn't go unnoticed by Reginald. “May I ask if you've come up with an explanation about Sierra's absence?” the General asked.

“No one knows she's disappeared.”

“Well, assuming she's not located in time for the wedding, I'm wondering what you will tell the press.”

“No one will ever know she's disappeared.” Reginald's anger began to rise.

“Sir, if I may, I have an idea of how you can explain the delay of the wedding. Of course it won't be necessary if she's found and returned, but if not, I think it would be sufficient for the people.”

“Tell me.”

“The public knows about the attempts on her life from

several months ago, so why not paint the picture there are current threats against her and you don't want to risk her safety by holding the wedding, that is, until the threat is nullified, which of course, would be once you find her."

Reginald rubbed his chin in heavy contemplation. "Yes, that sounds good. Alert the press as head of my security you've determined there is a viable threat to Ms. Montgomery's life and the wedding is currently on hold."

"Yes sir," General Steinman saluted and left the room.

Reginald leaned back in his chair and inhaled deeply. Relief settled over him. What would he do without his trusted aids and personnel? General Steinman had come up with plausible propaganda. People overall are weak minded and believe whatever is placed before them, but not Reginald himself, no, he was smarter than that.

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The next day started good with no new developments to report on any level. Sam joined Paul in the crawl space and together they worked at the dirt and rocks. Sierra joined them but remained over in the opposite corner curled up in a blanket.

"She's real cute, Pauly," Sam teased quietly.

"Shut up," Paul hissed. He hated it when his older

brother called him that.

“Come on, you know I’m only jealous. I’ve never been in your situation, you know, sleeping with a crosser.”

“Leave it to you to make it sound scandalous,” Paul said. “Why are there so many damn rocks?” He reached down and wrapped his fingers around a rock twelve inches across and heaved it out of the tunnel.

By Zachary’s calculations, they still had about four feet of earth to move before they would reach the tunnel wall. Every four inches they progressed forward, they installed a two-by-four wood plank with uprights to support it. The tunnel they were digging was five feet tall and three feet wide. In the crawl space, it sloped down ramp style till its height reached five feet directly under the foundation of the house. It followed the outer side of the solid cement wall which formed the basement. Soon they would connect perpendicularly to the existing tunnel.

Zachary had begun forming the doorway on the inside wall of the existing tunnel. He needed to cut the upright beams and install a header for support, and he planned on running a line of wire to power low wattage lighting.

“Paul, hand me another upper beam.”

“We’re all out of upper beams. I’ll go get more.” They both knew the beams were outside in the back yard.

“No, I’ll do it,” Sam said. “Stay with Sara.”

They both climbed up the ramp into the crawl space. It pained both of their backs to be hunched over for the extended amounts of time required to dig and haul the bucket loads of dirt and rock, mostly rock. Even in the crawl space they couldn’t stand completely. Paul and Sam walked like hunchbacks toward the trap door.

Sierra sat on the blanket near the trap door watching in earnest as they approached. “What’s going on?” she asked.

Paul lay on the blanket to try to stretch his muscles, anything to ease his throbbing back. “We’re out of upper beams. He’s going to get more.”

“How is the digging going?”

“Slow. We’re almost there, I think.”

“I wish my foot felt better, I’d help you dig,” she smiled. She sat cross-legged next to his torso. “It is feeling a lot better. I can put weight on it now, I’ve been practicing.”

“That’s not a good idea if it’s broken.” He looked over at her. She had an expression on her face Paul couldn’t read. His lack of experience with girls made it even more difficult to decipher her expressions. It would be so much

easier if girls had flash cards stating their emotions at the time.

“What’s wrong Paul?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re looking at me like something is wrong.”

“Oh sorry, I was just... pondering.”

“Pondering,” she repeated, enunciating each syllable.

“Sara, what do you plan to do with your life once you’re free?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it that far.”

“Maybe you should.”

“You sound confident I will be able to escape completely.”

“Do you have doubts?”

“Frankly, yes. You don’t know the Rawlings family like I do. They don’t ever stop. I’ll probably have to flee to another country, except...”

“Except what?” He saw pain in her eyes. He saw fear and agony. But why?

They were interrupted by the trap door falling open and boards clattering down. She jumped nervously and Paul instinctively sat up and placed his hand on hers.

The trap door closed, but Sam hadn't come down. Paul spotted a note attached to one of the boards. He moved quickly and grabbed it. *'Stay put, men at the door.'* He looked upward at the floor joists.

"What is it, Paul?"

He turned his head toward her and placed his finger to his lips signaling her to be quiet. He moved back over to her side and handed her the note. She read it and her eyes shot upward too. They hadn't heard the doorbell, there weren't any footstep sounds.

Paul motioned toward the furthest corner and he helped her move. This position placed them in the southwest corner under the living room. The boxes of supplies were there with them. Paul reached in one box and pulled out a blanket which he spread out on the ground.

"Lie down here," he said quietly. She seemed frightened to him and he wished he could comfort her, but he didn't know what to do.

She whispered back, "Is this a raid?"

“I don’t think so. It’s quiet up there, so we’ll wait till Sam comes back down. Are you cold?” He’d seen her shiver.

“No, well maybe a little, I’m scared.” She tried to smile but her chin quivered with the effort.

There was just enough light from the bulb by the trap door to cast a glimmer on the gathering moisture in her eyes. His heart swelled with concern and he sat beside her. He slid his arm under her neck and helped her sit up, and pulled her body into his arms.

Her head came to rest on the front of his shoulder and her forehead fit perfectly against his neck. He held her close across his lap with his hand wrapped across her cradling the back of her head. She reached her arm up around his neck and held on for her life.

She felt entirely safe in his arms; the same arms which had pulled her from the ice and nursed her back to the land of the living. Was it coincidence or fate that he found her? She didn’t know, only she was safe in his arms at this moment and she wished for it to never end.

Paul on the other hand sat holding his crosser and his mind racing with the impossibilities of keeping her safe. They were trapped down in this hole. The exit wasn’t completed, not near enough. How was he supposed to protect her? This vulnerable, highly sought after, incredibly

beautiful crosser had accidentally become his responsibility, his first ever because he saw her orange bandanna in the ice and didn't turn the other way. Now, she literally clung to him.

He rubbed the back of her head and leaned his head on hers. Her tense arm which had wrapped itself around his neck had now relaxed and her thumb was lazily rubbing his neck. The action made him feel suddenly different; tense, but not because of the possible danger above, but because of the possible situation below.

He put his focus back on the happenings upstairs, but nothing sounded out of the ordinary. Pulling his head away from hers, he looked down at her. At the same time, she looked up at him and her hand on the back of his neck moved forward, cradling his jaw under his ear. Again her thumb made the lazy circles of desire across his skin, heating it.

Her eyes were shadowed from the light and Paul couldn't see their intent. Her head lifted slightly from his shoulder as her hand on his neck pulled him toward her. It became obvious to Paul, only a fraction of a second before it happened; she was going to kiss him.

Their lips met, sweetly. Paul's initial thought racing through his head was she was thanking him for protecting her with a polite kiss. All his senses he'd purposely closed



off, awakened. His curiosities, his wonderings and his dreams of her needed to be explored if only for a moment.

His mouth opened, inviting her in, hoping she wouldn't turn tail and run the other way. On the contrary, she took the invitation and responded in a heated passionate kiss. Her feelings for him were passed through her lips to his, through her hands as they caressed his chest and torso. The intensity of the moment had him leaning forward, supporting her as he laid her back to the blanketed ground. She willingly let him do so, never breaking mouth to mouth contact. On her back, both of her hands were in his hair turning his head to get the best possible angle on his mouth.

He rested his weight on his elbow with his hand under her head as he stretched out beside her, his mouth never leaving hers. His other hand wrapped around her middle and his palm was under her back supporting her.

The sweetness of her mouth and incredible softness of her lips had driven him crazy with desire; otherwise he would have heard the trap door drop open and his brother entering the crawl space.

“Is she hurt?” Sam questioned in a loud annoyed voice.

Panic raced through Paul as he quickly sat up and moved away to arms length. “Whoa! Sam!”

“Yep, it’s me. Is she hurt?”

“No,” Paul and Sierra said at the same time with the same amount of guilt in their voices.

“Well,” Sam chuckled, “it just looked like you were performing mouth to mouth on her, that’s all.”

Paul and Sierra looked at each other, then back to Sam. Their hands had been caught in the cookie jar. It seemed incredible to Paul that his mind had completely blanked everything else out except for Sierra. Evidently hers had too, or she would have heard the trap door open.

“Who was...you know, um...upstairs?” Paul wondered if his hair was as messed up as Sierra’s or if his face was as red as it felt.

“When I came into the living room, Mom was stepping out on the porch to speak with someone. So, I looked through the peep hole and saw two men in suits and ties speaking with her. I attached the note to the wood and dropped it down the hole until I could ascertain if the men were a threat or not.”

“Well? Were they?”

“Actually, yes, they were.” His eyes focused on Sierra who had propped herself up on her elbows. “They were looking for you. They had a physical description and said a

reward has been posted.”

“A reward? Like money?” she asked.

“A great deal of ‘like’ money,” Sam nodded and then smiled. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to turn you in. Not when I can get to see a humongous display of innocent embarrassment. I’ll leave you two alone so you can try to explain your instant awkward attraction and utter something like, ‘I don’t know what came over me’ or ‘I’m sorry about that, it won’t happen again.’”

Sam left. Paul took a deep cleansing breath and looked at Sierra. Before he could even formulate any words, she spoke first, “Paul, I do know what came over me and I’m not sorry one bit. From your reaction, I think you feel the same.”

He leaned forward, took her chin in his hand and kissed her lips again. “I’m only sorry I didn’t hear him come down the hole.”

“I didn’t hear him either!” she whispered with amazement in her voice.

He pulled her up into a hug and caressed the back of her head. “That was even better than my dreams.” He kissed the top of her head. “I need to go dig with Sam.”

She nodded as he got up. She watched him leave the

blanketed area and saw him turn around to throw her an appreciative smile. It made her soul melt and her core heat up again. What had made her act so impulsively? What did it matter? She wanted to kiss him. He clearly liked it, the same as she had and yet she was surprised by the amount of passion between the two of them. Then, the comment about her being in his dreams shot a lightning bolt to her toes. She didn't know he'd dreamt about her. It was an exciting revelation.

Paul made it down the tunnel to where Sam was already positioning an overhead board in place. "Thought you'd never come," Sam laughed in spite of himself.

"Drop it, Sam."

"Oh no, I can't do that. You see, you've made the biggest mistake ever where crossers are concerned: never become attached to one. But it's just our little secret, right?"

"I've never been in on those 'cardinal rules' Sam."

"It's common sense, little bro. Use your head. She will be gone before you know it and you'll be left here. It's called self preservation, man."

"Is that how come you've never married? Self preservation has helped you reach the ripe old age of twenty six without a broken heart. Sheez, how do you do it?"

Sam stalked over to Paul, more like he waddled, half bent over due to the low ceiling height. “Don’t begin to think you understand anything about me, ‘cause you don’t! And don’t think you know more than me about complications that can come from getting too involved with a crosser!”

“Alright,” Paul held his hands up in front of himself, “simmer Sam. Obviously I’ve hit a nerve.”

“Yeah. Let’s just drop this. We’ve got to finish this before those men come back.”

“Right.”

## Chapter 7

By the evening, they reached the tunnel. They were both covered in sweat and dust and Paul’s mouth had dirt in it. Whenever he put his teeth together, they crunched with grit. He continually spit to get it out, to no avail.

He asked his grandma to stay with Sierra while he cleaned up. He took a quick shower and then he went outside to chop some firewood; being around Sierra was driving him crazy. Being hunched over all day had taken its toll on him but not more than the emotional storm brewing in his gut. The kiss he and Sierra shared still sent tingles through his body when he thought about it.

Paul swung the axe hard and it sunk into the large log. Chopping wood for the fireplaces had always been one of Paul's responsibilities he shared with Sam. Tonight, Paul actually welcomed the extracurricular activity. He needed something to ground his mind with. What better way than chopping the hell out of the firewood stack.

"Whoa! What got into you, Paul?" Greg looked over the fence with both arms folded across the top of the rail.

Paul looked at him and then slammed the axe down again chopping a log in half. "Why do you ask?" he answered with a smile.

"All this pent up anger you're taking out on innocent logs can't be good."

"Who said it was anger?"

"Isn't it?"

Paul wiped his brow with his sleeve, "No. As a matter of fact, I'm feeling pretty good." He leaned the axe against the chopping log and walked over to the fence. He pulled his leather gloves off one finger at a time.

"Feeling good about what?"

"Can't a guy just feel good without a reason?" Paul spread his arms wide and looked to the sky.

“You have a girl! You lucky buck! I didn’t even know you were dating anyone. Wait, is it the new waitress at the diner?”

“No. Can you keep a secret?”

“You bet!”

Paul leaned closer to Greg and said, “I told you my crosser is male but that wasn’t true. I am actually caring for a girl and today, we kissed.”

“Get out!”

“It wasn’t any old ordinary kiss either. It was...amazing.”

“A girl, in your room? How come you didn’t tell me sooner? How old is she?”

“Old enough. She’s not jailbait, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Who is she? Can I see her?”

“You know I can’t tell you and no, you can’t see her.”

“I won’t try to steal her from you, come on, don’t you trust me?”

“I trust you enough to share this with you. Isn’t that

enough?”

“Are you going to kiss her again?”

“Probably, if it feels right.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, if I sense she wants me to, then I will.”

“I hate you, you know that?” Greg smiled a particularly evil grin at Paul.

Exhausted and sweating from exertion, Paul stood in the shower once again. He had a smile on his face that probably shouldn't be there, but it wouldn't go away. He scrubbed his face violently to try to rub it off, but it was no use. Paul was simply happy and possibly in love.

Once he'd finished with his shower and had dressed again, he entered his room. Sierra was lying on her back on the bed with a smile on her face too.

“You look refreshed,” she said.

“I don't feel it. Every muscle in my body hurts. What didn't hurt from digging, hurts now from chopping wood, but not to worry, I'll live.”

“Martha is something else. She was full of questions



about Rendier and Reginald Rawlings.”

“What information was she after?”

“She wanted to know where my father’s grave is. I think she plans on investigating his death. If she can prove he was murdered it would look bad for Reginald Rawlings.”

“That’s actually a good idea. Maybe it would be enough to cause an overthrow of power,” Paul agreed.

“I’m glad you finished the tunnel today. Now we won’t feel so trapped.”

In the kitchen, Martha, Elsie and Zachary sat at the table with Sam.

“Reginald’s presence is increasing,” Zachary said.

Sam added, “Peter from Sophie’s said a large truck load of soldiers arrived tonight. If you ask me, a raid is going down soon.”

“I agree,” Martha said and Elsie nodded.

“Have each crosser wear their shoes tonight,” Zachary stated, “and have their belongings close by for an easy organized escape.”

“Zachary,” Elsie worried, “we’ve never evacuated seven

before. In fact, there isn't enough room in the escape car for all seven plus a driver. I'm sure you've already thought about that."

"I have arranged for two vehicles already. Paul and Sara will take one and Sam will take the other with the six crossers. They won't be looking for Sam's crossers. Sara needs to be kept separate."

"What about Paul?" Sam asked. "He doesn't know what to do or who to avoid. Plus, he's gone and fallen for his crosser."

"That's an easy thing to do, wouldn't you agree Sam?" Elsie said.

"His mind isn't clear. It's muddled with feelings. He'll botch this up," Sam said.

Zachary jumped in, "All the more reason to keep Sara separate from the others. Should Paul mess up, they will capture her. I don't believe Paul is in any danger because he's so young. He wouldn't be viewed as a threat to anyone and would be left alone."

"I think Paul and Sara should sleep in the crawl space tonight," Elsie stated. "The bedroom is so close to the front door. It's not like the crosser room downstairs. Paul's bedroom will be one of the first rooms to be searched. If they stayed in the crawl space tonight, they'd already be

down below in the morning if a raid happens.”

Zachary nodded to Elsie, “Go have them move down. It will be considerably colder down there than his bedroom.”

“Not to worry,” Sam said wryly. “I’m sure he’ll love the opportunity to keep her warm.”

“Sam, keep your crossers in the room tonight. If the raid happens in the morning, evacuate then. We shouldn’t lose sleep over a raid that may not happen.”

“But it will happen, won’t it?” Sam voiced the thought on everyone’s mind.

“Probably so,” Zachary’s tone said it all. Undoubtedly, their lives were about to change.

The instructions to sleep in the crawl space had Paul on edge. His mother acted calm and collected but the undertones of this move signified an imminent raid. Both Paul and Sierra were dressed in blue jeans and long sleeved shirts and wore their shoes to bed.

Several additional blankets were added to the already large pile of bedding on the foam mattress for comfort and warmth. They were instructed to only use minimal light and even less talking.

Elsie took her son by the arm after Sierra was situated

under the house, “You need to be careful here.”

“I know.”

“No, listen to me. The stage is set for a raid. It’s going to happen. Don’t be caught off guard, Paul. Keep your mind focused.”

“Mom,”

“Don’t let yourself become consumed with her. You are her protector, not her boyfriend.”

“Mom! I know.” Sam must have told her about finding them kissing.

“Be ready at first light. If you are caught, don’t fight. They’ll take her and probably leave you alone.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Don’t be arrogant.”

“Are we done here?” he hated being rude with his mother, but she wasn’t giving him enough credit.

“No. I love you, Paul and I’m so proud of you.”

Paul wasn’t expecting that. “I love you too and thank you. It will be alright, you’ll see.” He closed the trap door

and went over to Sierra. His mother's obvious fear was something he hadn't seen before.

"What was that all about?"

"She's just worried."

Sierra cuddled up next to him.

"My mother is also concerned I'll be too distracted with you to notice a raid. As much as I'd like to get close with you again, we shouldn't. Sam was able to sneak right up on us. We can't afford for that to happen again."

"You're right."

"Escaping a raid is a precision timed thing. If we leave too early or too late, we'll be caught, and as I've never done this before, it could get interesting."

"When is the opportune time to flee?"

"During the crashing and breaking."

"What does that mean?"

"Just what it sounds like, crashing and breaking. Raids always start quickly. They tear through the house looking for crossers. The idea is to catch everyone off guard. So, when the damage is going on upstairs, we flee."

“Won’t they see us leave?”

“No. The tunnel exits quite a long way away from our house. They monitor the doors and windows for escapees, but they don’t know about our tunnel. When they raid and find nothing and no one is caught fleeing the home, they figure the crossers were moved already or were never here. Well, anyway, that’s how it’s supposed to happen.”

“Why does your family house crossers if this is what you have to look forward to?”

“It’s the determination of my mother and father and their hatred toward the Rawlings’ which fuels their desire. Things can all be replaced, but lives cannot.”

“You know, even as I asked the question I already knew the answer. I feel the same way. I want to defy the Rawlings’ also by helping people flee the country. Help me survive this, Paul. Help me to be able to help others.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She smiled at him then leaned toward him and kissed him tenderly on the lips. Not a passionate kiss like earlier, but a thank you kiss.

They snuggled down into their warm bedding and eventually fell asleep. During the night, he awoke to her shivering. He pulled her closer and shared his warmth by

wrapping his arms around her. She fit so perfectly in his arms.

The wee hours of the morning brought the realization he'd slept very intimately with Sierra in the crawl space of his home. Paul inhaled the uniquely sweet scent of her and couldn't imagine being anywhere else. He saw a faint light coming in through one of the vents. He heard soft footsteps over head and figured his mother was up to prepare breakfast. Sierra stirred in her sleep and Paul held her tighter. Any moment it would all be stepped up. Any second this serene setting would be shattered. Paul couldn't believe he'd actually wished for this responsibility. The thought of how simple his life had been prior to finding Sierra made him shudder. His life would never be the same, but that wasn't a bad thing.

Elsie and Zachary lay in bed as the first light from the impending dawn began to filter into the room. Elsie's mind was busy. She thought about all the possibilities of the day and impossibilities. 'What ifs' filled her soul. What if things went sour? What if anyone was killed during a raid? What if Paul was captured or harmed? Elsie concluded she was ready to get out of the crossing business. She had raised two boys to adulthood while hiding defectors from Rendier.

Sam had experienced devastating trauma during the last five years, and now Paul was in up to his neck. Sam's traumatic experiences had also involved a female crosser

and his judgment was clouded by emotions. He tried to hide his emotional scars from it, but every now and then, she saw through her son's facade. What she saw was pain and longing.

Paul on the other hand had been protected. Elsie prided herself on keeping Paul out of the crossers loop. She kept him in the dark and didn't give him many responsibilities all in the hopes he would be able to make a life for himself someday. It wouldn't matter if he chose to house crossers, if it was his own choice.

However, her intentions to protect him had only upset him. He didn't feel like anyone believed in him or his abilities. Nothing could be further from the truth. She did scold him on occasion when he'd verbalize his disinterest in helping crossers, but in all honesty, she hoped he could figure his own life out.

Elsie heard the quiet knock on her bedroom door and assumed it was Martha. She slid out of bed and into her house slippers then walked to the door. She opened it expecting to see Martha only to see no one. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end as she stepped out into the living room. Immediately a strong arm wrapped around her neck with a large gloved hand covering her mouth before she could scream with terror.

## Chapter 8



The expected raid was already in progress, but it was all wrong. Why was this raid being executed differently? Unless they knew for certain their targeted crosser was here.

The gloved man dragged her over to the couch and as she passed Paul's bedroom door she strained her eyes to see in. She was so glad they decided to hide them in the crawl space. Hopefully, Paul would hear the commotion and get out in time, except, there wasn't any commotion yet. She saw Martha already sitting on the couch with her mouth taped shut and a gun to her head. What about Sam? Had he escaped with his crossers?

Elsie was pushed down onto the couch next to Martha and Duct tape slammed across her mouth. Her eyes met Martha's, then switched over to the bedroom door to see four men hauling out Zachary. He was deposited next to Elsie on the couch with his mouth already taped.

The three of them looked toward the front door as a figure stepped out from the shadows. He walked over and stood in front of Martha. His size and bulk dwarfed her.

"We know she is here. You're hiding her. I don't have a beef with you three, but I do have to report to my boss who is outside right now and he isn't very kind when he's angry. Tell me where the girl is and everything will go smoothly, try to hide her from me and, well, let's just say things won't go

so well." The brutish looking man threaded his fingers slowly into brass knuckles.

Martha moved so quickly brass knuckles man didn't even see her coming. She rammed her body into his making him fall backward onto the coffee table. She fell also and split her head open on the corner of the table, but it was a far better injury than the thug. He smashed the glass fruit bowl with his back and blood began to pool around his sides on the shattered tabletop. His howl sounded like a little girl.

Zachary and Elsie jumped to their feet and rammed into the nearest brute. Paul needed to hear commotion to know it was time to leave. Elsie kicked her would be assailant in the family jewels doubling him over in pain. Zachary plowed into a man sending him flailing backwards into Paul's bedroom door, slamming it into the wall behind.

Paul heard the melee of loud sounds upstairs. Both he and Sierra bolted straight up. They heard shouting and screams of perhaps pain along with the sound of broken glass and his bedroom door banging against the wall as it was pushed open.

"Time to go," he whispered and helped Sierra over to the tunnel entrance. She was shaking head to toe and Paul felt sorry for her. It was difficult to help her through the narrow tunnel and keep the weight off of her foot but they

did it anyway.

“Crashing and breaking, I get it now,” she whispered.

“They’re just getting started, now is our window of escape.”

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Victor Rawlings stood outside the Bronson home smoking his cigarette. He admired the view to the south. The Trejo Mountains framed the huge lake in front of him and the enormous mountain range behind him almost made him feel insignificant.

Almost.

He listened to the raid going on behind him and smiled an evil grin at the thought of finding Sierra. How dare she try to evade him. How dare she think she even could. No one gets away from the Rawlings’. No one! They’d find her and get her back to Rendier soon and the postponed wedding would be able to proceed at its originally scheduled time; four o’clock this afternoon. No one in Rendier would be aware of her disappearance; it would be as if it never happened.

“Sir,” a voice came from behind, “we’ve searched the home. She’s not here.”

“Yes, she is. Keep looking,” Victor stated plainly.

Victor heard the door close behind him. The sun was thinking about making its presence known to the east and a bluish pink hue covered everything. Once we are back to the palace, Victor thought, she’s going to be married to me ASAP. No more waiting. She won’t escape me. The fake threat on her life would be reported as canceled making his father look all the more powerful against weak countrymen.

He waited for several more minutes for the word they’d found her, but it never came. Flicking his cigarette in no particular direction, he whirled around on his feet and headed to the door. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

Victor entered the home and was immediately flanked by two guards for protection; from whom he did not know. Everyone here was adequately subdued. Three adults sat on the sofa, each bleeding in some way. The sight made him feel powerful. Anyone who thought they could defy his father and hide crossers deserved to be caught and made to suffer.

One of his top bodyguards lay on the floor in front of the couch.

“Get him out of here,” Victor didn’t speak to anyone in particular but all the same, two men stepped forward and

pulled the injured man away.

“Sir, we’ve searched everywhere. The perimeter guards reported no one left the premises during the raid. She’s not here.”

Victor turned to the bleeding three on the sofa. “I know you’ve been housing Sierra. Now, where is she?”

The duct tape was ripped off their mouths. Martha replied with a snide remark, “Thanks, now I won’t have to wax.”

Zachary spoke up. “It is true we housed a female crosser, but she’s already gone. Once they leave our home, we don’t know where they go.”

“Liar!” Victor roared. One of Victor’s guards stormed over and backhanded Zachary across the cheek. Victor liked this unspoken understanding he had with his men. They could almost read his mind. Almost. “I have it on good authority your younger son is housing Sierra. Where is his bedroom?”

Zachary’s eyes looked in the direction of Paul’s room off the living room. Victor followed his direction and walked over to the entrance of the room. Slowly, he investigated the room. Quite simple; a double bed, two end tables, a lone chair in the corner by the window, and a closet. He looked in the closet to see organized shelves and compartments.

Victor studied the wood floor in the closet and throughout the room for tell-tale signs of secret trap doors, but he didn't see anything. No strategically placed rugs to hide one. No unusual patterns to catch his eye. Victor left the room.

"Where did your son go? Clearly he did not sleep in his room last night," Victor addressed Zachary.

"He left with the girl already."

"Yes, but when?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Your son was seen here late last night. I'm losing my patience with you and when that happens, people start to die." One of his guards shouldered his automatic rifle and aimed it at the three terrified people on the couch.

"He left during the raid," Zachary conceded.

"Impossible. My guards have been watching and saw no one leave."

"I assure you, they did."

Victor began barking out orders, "Search every garage and wood shed in the near vicinity. They haven't gone far. Find them." He turned back to Zachary. "Defying Reginald Rawlings is a crime punishable by death."

“Only in Rendier,” Zachary stated calmly, “killing people in Baylend because Rendierians escaped under Reginald’s nose will only encourage the anti-authoritarian governments to issue an investigation. I don’t think your father wants that kind of publicity.”

The arrogance Victor possessed was inherent to his upbringing, but his lack of wisdom due to his young age of eighteen coupled with his uncertainty about his father’s wishes stayed his hand. Otherwise, he’d have given the orders for all three to be killed. Someday, Victor thought, when I’m ruler I won’t be afraid of killing traitors in other countries.

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Paul and Sierra had reached the end of the tunnel where a ladder stood before them and a trap door up above.

“Where does it lead?” Sierra whispered.

“It’s a garage with a get-a-way car.” Paul reached up to unlatch the door but the sound of footsteps above made him stop. He looked at Sierra and placed his finger on his lips to signal her to be quiet. He reached past her and twisted the light bulb over her head until it died leaving them in complete darkness.

They both listened as footsteps sounded above their heads. Muffled voices spoke unintelligibly. Their hearts raced with the terror of being found. Then the steps faded and they heard a door close.

Paul reached for the light bulb and twisted it back on. The low light washed over Sierra's petrified face and he was filled with anguish. He took her into his arms and held her trembling body.

"That was too close."

"Are they gone?" she asked into his chest.

"I think so, but we should stay down here for a while. They are obviously searching outdoor buildings. If we try to drive away right now, we'll be caught."

"We missed our tiny escape window."

"Yes. It was smaller than I thought it would be. We should have run into Sam and his crossers but he must have evacuated his crossers already."

"So, what now?"

"We wait. We can't go back, we can't go forward."

"Limbo."



“Exactly. Let’s sit down at least.”

He sat first and helped her down onto his lap so she wouldn’t have to sit on the dirt. They kept the position for a long time, till Paul’s legs went to asleep. She sensed his discomfort and moved to sit beside him.

“Paul, how long is this tunnel?”

“What do you mean?”

“How far away from your home are we?”

“The tunnel ends four homes away from mine. The garage above belongs to a friend of my fathers. He doesn’t have any idea about the tunnel, but he is aware we keep escape cars inside.”

“Your family is wonderful. I sure hope everyone is alright.”

“Me too.”

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“Sir, the surrounding buildings have been cleared. Should we check the neighboring homes?”

“No. We don’t need to start a panic. Bring the informant to me.”

“Yes sir.”

Greg Bidell was ushered into the Bronson’s home, past the three adults on the sofa who gave him the ‘if looks could kill he’d be dead’ glare, and led to Victor Rawlings who sat comfortably in the kitchen.

“Sit. Please.” Victor invited him. Greg did as instructed. “She is not here.”

“You should have raided last night when I discovered her presence.” Greg immediately regretted chastising Victor Rawlings even though he was right. The look on Victor’s face had him worried for his safety now. He’d need to come up with some other information to satisfy Victor. “I don’t know where he might have taken her, but I can give you some profile information about him.”

“Go on.” Victor’s eyebrow shot up in interest.

“He’s nineteen, strong both physically and mentally, however, he’s never taken care of a crosser before. He won’t know what to do or how long to stay away. He’ll call home. It’s only a matter of time.”

“How well do you know him?”

“Very well. He confided in me. He told me they had kissed, that’s how I found out he was housing a female, not a male. I informed you right away.”

“Did he sleep with her?”

“They have been sleeping in the same bed since she arrived.”

“No, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, oh I’m not sure. He was all excited over a kiss. Maybe it was more of a make out, I don’t know. I don’t think they’ve...you know...done it.”

“You don’t think?” Victor asked sarcastically.

“Paul is not that type of guy.”

“Every guy is that type.” Victor ran his fingers through his hair. “Alright, you will stay in this house and answer every phone call and doorbell. When he calls home, you tell him whatever it takes to find his location, and then call me. I’m going to take all my men back to Rendier to hopefully hasten his resurfacing. If he feels safe, he’ll peek his head out of his hole. Then we’ll grab him. If you fail in any way, I’ll be done with you, permanently.” Victor stood and straightened his jacket and looked back at Greg with an evil glare in his eyes. “Next time you tell me what I should have done, I’ll kill you.”

“Yes sir.” Greg lowered his head. Victor left the kitchen and Greg immediately started formulating his plan of

finding Paul. He knew exactly where to look and was glad he didn't tell Victor everything about Paul.

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"What time is it Paul?" Sierra asked.

He looked at his watch. "It's noon. Are you hungry?"

"I am, but it's alright. I can wait."

"No, there's food back in the crawlspace. I'll go back and get some."

"Don't leave me, Paul." The frantic panic in her voice pulled at his gut.

"It's a long way back and your ankle..."

"What if someone comes while you're gone? What if you are captured? I can wait for food, honestly. I'd rather starve than be left alone and... risk losing you."

"Alright, no food. Tell me about your life."

Sierra shifted her position and turned to look at him. She knew he was only trying to get their minds off of the hunger pains. "My mom died when I was eight. I don't remember very much about her, except her smile and tenderness."

“How did she die?”

“I don’t know. I think she was ill but I’m not sure. My father was so distraught that I didn’t ever question him. It always made him sad so I didn’t dwell on my mother’s death.”

“Was there a death certificate?”

“Yes, but cause of death was listed as natural.”

“Tell me about your father.”

“He worked for Reginald Rawlings as an adviser. Not that Reginald ever took his advice, but it looked good to the outside Donald Montgomery was advising him. Once Victor’s eye trained in on me, Reginald decided he didn’t need my father for public support. He’d have his son marry Donald’s daughter and place a Montgomery within the palace.”

“I don’t understand the importance of your last name.”

“The King who was overthrown by Alexandar Rawlings was married to a Montgomery. She was a distant relation to my father. Once Alexandar had taken over the country he began the Montgomery hunt. He’d heard about rebellion factions wanting to assassinate him and place a Montgomery back in power so he started killing them all. My father told me his parents went into hiding for many

years. That's where he met my mother whom he would marry at a later date. Somewhere along the timeline, my grandparents died as well as Alexandar, and that's when Reginald became ruler.

“Reginald tried to appear good and wholesome for the first many years. He urged the remaining Montgomery family to come out of hiding although most of them were dead or had crossed the border already. Reginald gave my father the position as advisor much to my mother's dismay. She died when I was eight and my father kept his position till the day Reginald murdered him.”

Paul completed Sierra's story with, “Reginald wanted you to marry his son because of your last name. He's struggling isn't he?”

“He is. He started off his rule trying to be good, but it didn't last too long. Now the people mutter against him and he realizes he doesn't have as many supporters as he would like.”

“So, by putting you into the mix, he'll get his desired support?”

“Right.”

“You're a princess.”

“I'm technically royalty but I don't have a title, nor do I

want one.”

“If the dissident factions would be satisfied with a Montgomery in the palace, wouldn’t they be even more satisfied if a Montgomery was in complete control of the country?”

“What are you getting at?”

“You seem to be the last remaining Montgomery. You could use your lineage to push your way to the top.”

“To the top of what? Ruling a country? I don’t want that, never did. I’d have to marry Victor in order to get into the palace.”

“Yes, but the doctor you talked about could poison Victor and Reginald and then you’d become the ruler.”

“Now you sound like them.” The disgust in her voice alarmed Paul.

“I didn’t mean to. I’m only saying you could use your name to rise to the top and get your country back.”

“It’s not that easy, Paul. As much as I want the Rawlings’ out of power, many still want them in power. If I succeeded in climbing to the top, I wouldn’t last long. I’d be assassinated. No one can waltz in and remove someone from power, except maybe another country’s government.

Even then, the pro supporters of the dethroned dictator would always be a problem.”

“I guess I haven’t given it enough thought.”

“Well, could someone walk into Baylend’s Presidential office and forcefully take over by killing your president? No. They’d be arrested and the internal government would be readjusted placing your vice president in charge. It’s kind of like that with a dictatorship too. Only, the first to move up into position would be Reginald’s heir, then Reginald’s top advisor, then the second top advisor and so on down the line. As much as the majority of my country hates being under an authoritative rule, there is a certain kind of comfort knowing what to expect from day to day. If someone like me tried to take over, it would cause civil war.”

“Sara, you are the wisest girl I’ve ever met.”

They talked through the afternoon as they sat in the cool damp tunnel, learning all about each other such as favorite hobbies, foods, activities and other personal preferences. After a while, she closed her eyes for a nap, leaving Paul to his own thoughts and his incredibly empty stomach. His thirst was paramount and hers was obvious in her voice as it had gone dry. All the talking had dried her out, literally.

“Wake up Sara.” Paul gently nudged her.

She sat up and looked around. Her tongue worked in



her mouth to find moisture and was having a difficult time.

“What time is it?”

“Six o’clock.”

She exhaled slowly, “I wonder what Reginald told the people about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“The wedding was supposed to take place at four o’clock. He would have given an excuse and I highly doubt he would say I’ve escaped.”

“Wow, you’d be married right now if you hadn’t crossed the border.”

“Is it time for us to leave the tunnel?” She changed the subject. She knew in her heart right now she’d be dead rather than being forced to marry Victor.

“Yes, I think so. It’s dark out so at least we have that advantage on our side.”

“Do we have to leave? I mean, couldn’t we stay here?”

“Something is not right. I think our house is still being watched or else my father would have come down here. He would have noticed the car is still in the garage and come

looking for us in the tunnel. The fact nothing has happened leads me to believe we are not safe down here and not safe back at my house either. We have to leave.”

“Alright.”

He helped her up and he positioned himself directly under the trap door to the garage. This door opened upward, not downward. He slowly pushed it up, peering out through the tiny crack. Not seeing anyone, he pushed it all the way open. He climbed out and turned around to help Sierra. She climbed the ladder with her one good foot as he pulled her up.

The only window in the garage faced the owner's home. The porch light spilled through the dusty window to give a small bit of light in the otherwise dark garage. Assorted yard tools hung in an organized fashion on the walls next to a rudimentary work bench covered with small baby food jars full of screws, nuts and bolts. An old bicycle hung upside down from the rafters, just high enough they didn't bump their heads on it.

Paul helped her to the passenger side of the four door sedan that was clearly an escape car as it had no license plates, keys were in the ignition and it had been backed into the garage for quicker escape.

Sierra sat in the car on the cool vinyl seat and fastened

her seat belt while Paul quickly opened the garage door and got in the car. He turned the key hoping the ignition would take the first time. It did not.

He turned the key again and listened as the engine tried to cooperate. Still nothing. His heart began racing even faster than it already was. He tried it one more time, this time giving it a little gas and the engine took off. A thick exhaust cloud filled the garage as they pulled forward out of the garage. Not a good sign.

Paul's eyes searched for guards and snipers, hoping they would be able to escape unnoticed. At the end of the alley, he applied the brakes only to hear the engine sputter and protest and die.

"No!" He slammed his palm against the steering wheel and turned the key again. The engine responded. The road was clear of cars so he was able to turn without completely stopping as he gave the struggling engine gas to coax it along. If he gunned it too hard, the noise would draw attention. A noisy, smoking, hauling butt car would certainly draw the wrong attention. What had his father been thinking when he chose this car?

"Where is everyone?" Sierra asked as they drove through town.

"I don't know. It's a little eerie." He looked in his rear

view mirror and saw nothing behind him. “We have to watch for followers. If someone is on our tail we can’t go to the cabin.”

“The cabin?”

“Yes, it’s where we are going to hide. Keep your eyes peeled.”

They drove through the streets and turned onto the highway heading west. If they drove far enough, they would end up in Northtown which was forty-five miles away. The turn off to the cabin lay only fifteen miles up this road; but it was literally ‘up’. They were about to climb in altitude.

The outlet of Slater Lake cut a rugged canyon through the hills to the west. The highway followed the small river for a couple of miles, then turned away and climbed the mountain with sharp switchbacks. The river continued on into a deep canyon which was excellent for white water rafting.

Greg and Paul had rafted the beautiful river many times. The south wall of the canyon had many waterfalls to view. The best waterfall was fifteen miles down the canyon on the right named Moose Creek Falls. It fell dramatically off of an overhang about thirty feet above. The river at that point was calm and stagnate and deep; perfect for swimming.

Whenever Paul rafted this river, he always knew where he was in relation to the highway because when they reached Moose Creek Falls he was directly south of the cabin. Last summer, he and Greg had hiked from the bridge to the top of Moose Creek Falls. The hike was mostly downhill and the small creek was in a constant state of falling until it plunged over the edge of the canyon. In hindsight, it was an idiotic, dangerous venture on their part, one his mother would have chastised him over.

The windshield wipers worked double time to clear the wet snow flakes attacking the car. The stiff wind blew the snow in an unorganized fashion and made visibility limited. Paul was relieved they didn't have to be out in this snow storm. He could see the small bridge up ahead which crossed over Moose Creek just east of the road to the cabin.

"We're almost there. Up ahead around this corner is a little road on the right..." The car began to sputter again even with the accelerator pressed. "You've got to be kidding me!"

The car died about one hundred feet from the turn off. Paul pulled over as far as he could before the car came to a complete stop. His mind reeled with panic. The cabin was over a mile down the road, or more like up the road. They would have to walk the rest of the way. But what to do about the car? They couldn't leave it where it currently sat; it

would be all too obvious. They might as well hang a sign with a giant arrow pointing down the lane saying, 'Escaped crosser that way'. Paul noticed Sierra was quiet. She hadn't complained when the engine died, she hadn't worried out loud about what they were going to do now.

He turned to her. "Some get away car, huh."

She smiled at him, but he could tell she was frightened.

"Well, um...we can't leave this car on the side of the road and we can't stay here. The cabin is about a mile away, however, it is going to be a climb to get to it. The blowing snow should cover our foot prints. As for the car," he turned around looking back down the road they had come up. "I will help you out and then I'll let the car roll backwards as far down the hill as I can. Maybe I can hide it off the road if I can get enough speed to get into the trees."

She added to his thought, "The further away from the road to the cabin, the less likely anyone would piece together we walked down it."

"Right. Plus, I'll walk back up the road and that will only show one set of footprints. Perhaps we can give the impression that another car stopped and gave me a ride." The plan seemed good but for one setback; her hurt leg. He would need to carry her one mile uphill to the cabin.

Well, let the games begin.

He gave her his coat to keep warm with while he moved the car. She initially protested this action, but he convinced her that his physical activity would keep him warm, but she would need all the warmth she could get.

Gravity helped roll the car backward and Paul hoped no other cars were coming behind him. He maneuvered over the little bridge and around the tight corners until he found an adequate place where the road had a steep incline down to the gutter. He used it to his advantage to roll the car out of sight. It would work until morning, hopefully. He double checked the interior of the car for any evidence they might have left behind and not seeing any, began his hike back up to Sierra.

Sierra sat on the fallen tree Paul had placed her on before he left. But not before he kissed her forehead. Now, she sat in the freezing wind with enormous wind driven snowflakes slamming into her face, waiting for Paul to come back. This was the first time she'd been alone since Paul pulled her from the lake.

Her mind went back to the horror stories she'd heard about crosser homes in Baylend. Her conclusion was these untrue stories were propaganda used to deter crossers from leaving Rendier. The Bronson family had been nothing but kind and gentle, putting themselves in harms way to help her. Not to mention taking care of the six others who

had escaped her attentions in the basement room. It would have been so horrible if they'd been captured or killed because of the heat on her head.

The bitter wind blasted her in the face and wet flakes hit her long eyelashes. She shivered even though she had two coats on. She wondered how Paul was doing with no coat.

What a gentleman. He reminded her of her father. Paul had worried out loud to her that he feared he couldn't protect her well enough. Nothing could be further than the truth. No one else would have done a better job.

Just a few days ago she'd decided death was better than staying in Rendier, she'd been wrong to consider death as an answer. The reason being she'd have never met Paul if she'd succeeded at starving herself. She wouldn't have been able to fall so completely in love with him if she hadn't fought for her life after crashing through the ice. She vowed at that moment to never again consider death as an option. One never knows what lies just around the corner.

Where was he anyway? How long had he been gone?

Headlights lit the trees up like daylight as a vehicle approached. She ducked her head down behind the snow covered bush in front of her and listened as the vehicle slowed to a stop.



## Chapter 9

Paul hiked up the road. He didn't realize he'd rolled backward so far. He quickened his pace to a jog which made his heart pump rapidly. He tucked his bare hands into his armpits to try to protect them from the wind. His thoughts went to Sierra and hoped she was warm enough, sitting all by herself on the fallen tree. He hated leaving her alone even for the few necessary minutes which were required to relocate the car. He picked up his jogging pace even more. He needed to get back to Sierra's side, where he belonged.

What a strange feeling. That's where he belonged, truly. He hadn't known what or where he fit in until he found her in the ice. And as reluctant as he was at first to accept this responsibility, he fully embraced it now, even if he was a blundering idiot about it. He'd do his best; he'd do it for her.

He slowed his pace as he crossed over the icy Moose Creek Bridge. The bright lights of a vehicle ahead had him ducking off the road to avoid being seen. The headlights weren't moving though, the car had stopped. Paul moved into a better position to be able to see the car. It was pulled over near the fallen tree where he'd left Sierra. The door was opened and someone quickly got in the car. The icy road made it impossible for the car to squeal its tires, but they tried it anyway. Instead, the back end moved sideways for a second before grabbing the traction it needed to

move.

Paul crouched down as the car went by, then he bolted ahead to the fallen tree.

“Sara!”

No answer.

“Sara, where are you?”

Nothing.

“Sara!” Panic like nothing he’d felt coursed through him. She had to be here somewhere. It couldn’t be possible she was gone. It couldn’t. He should have taken her with him. That was her fear in the tunnel, being left alone and captured. “Sara!” His voice cracked as he yelled to the heavens and fell to his knees.

A faint voice entered his mind, “Paul, help.”

He stood and looked all around. What he wouldn’t do for a flashlight or lantern. “Sara?”

The harsh wind made it incredibly difficult to hear, but not entirely. He heard the soft voice again. He moved in its direction and found himself without ground under his feet. He fell down a steep slope and landed in the freezing water of Moose Creek. He quickly scrambled back up and out of

the water. Looking around, he saw her.

“Sara!”

She let go of the small bush she clung to and waved her arm at him.

Paul watched in horror as she began floating downstream. As he chased her along side the creek, she frantically reached for anything to grab. Paul knew what lay ahead; certain death. He had to reach her before she hit the steep descent to the canyon.

He crashed into the water as he caught up with her and grabbed her arm. Heavy water soaked clothes and gravity worked against him. The stream seemed to have a mind of it's own with dark plans to separate them. He lost his grasp on her and she floated away.

In his minds eye, he could imagine her plunging over the rim of the canyon. The river would be frozen over except for where the falls constantly splashed. If she went over, the current would take her downstream under the ice and she wouldn't be able to surface!

Adrenaline coursed through his veins giving him almost superhuman strength. He rushed toward her, running as fast as he could until he caught her by the arm of her coat. He readjusted his grip and pulled her toward him. The bank of the creek at that location was too steep to climb. They

would have to go upstream to a better area in order to get out. He pulled and she pushed with her one good foot till they reached a better spot of the bank to exit. Together they slammed their bodies down on the snowy bank in utter exhaustion. Their wet clothes immediately turned crispy as the water froze.

“Paul,” she whispered. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

He turned his head to her. They were both breathing raggedly and basically dying on the bank of Moose Creek. He pushed himself up using sheer will to survive.

“Come-on. Got-t-go.” He pulled her upright and she threw her arms around him.

“I knew you’d f-find me.”

He kissed her forehead and cheeks. “We need to get to the c-cabin.”

“T-take your co-coat.”

“No. Keep h-hit. Ge-hit on my b-back, I’ll care-he you.” She did so and he began moving forward. They weren’t going to die of hypothermia! He’d get her to the cabin and they’d be ok. He just needed to keep moving. He lumbered slowly upstream along the bank until he found a good place to climb up the hill in the direction of the cabin. He couldn’t

tell how far away from the main highway they were but he knew if he headed to the left, he'd find the little road leading to the cabin.

He eventually found the road about one hundred yards north of the highway turnoff. At least there weren't any tracks, car or human, for that distance. With Sierra on his back, he made a single set of footprints in the snow which he felt was a good thing in case anyone found them. Although, the pace at which the snow fell undoubtedly would cover his single footprints in a hurry. He picked up his pace as much as he could with frozen stiff jeans and numb feet. Frostbite quickly became an issue in his mind.

A couple of times, he walked right off the road and stumbled to the ground. The blinding snowstorm had him so disoriented he started to wonder if he'd gotten turned around somewhere along the way. Sheer will powered his legs and mind to continue forward. When he finally saw the outline of the cabin in front of him he nearly collapsed with joy.

Now came the hard part; staying awake.

He needed to make a fire, warm some soup and keep her alert all at the same time. He checked his watch to discover they'd been in the harsh elements for nearly one and a half hours. He knew his father would die if he ever knew what the faulty escape car had put them through.

He leaned to the side to let Sierra down. Their clothing had frozen together in places and made a cracking sound as it broke apart. She sat down on the wood floor as he fumbled with his numb fingers to find the hidden key in the rafters. He couldn't tell if he was touching it or not. He swept his hand along the beam to knock the key off and hoping at the same time, it wouldn't fall between the cracks of the porch.

Clink.

He'd found it. He bent down to pick it up but couldn't seem to do so. His fingers wouldn't squeeze hard enough to hold the key and it kept falling. Sierra came to his rescue and picked it up for him. He inserted the key and turned the stiff knob. Then he helped her inside.

The immediate warmth amazed Paul. By simply having the wind off them made such a huge difference. Sierra sat on the couch and he stood frozen in his shoes.

"Don't fall as-sleep. I'll make f-fire." He moved slowly and deliberately toward the door. He did not want to go outside again, but what choice did he really have? He pulled the door open.

"Wait!" She exclaimed through chattering teeth. He turned around. "Stove or oven?"

He pointed to the kitchen area.

She stood and hobbled over to the electric oven and turned on every burner and broiler and propped the oven door open. She looked to him and smiled with her hands outstretched toward the heat already filling the room.

“You’re a genius!” He closed the door and grabbed two chairs from the table and took them over by the stove.

She was already undoing her coat zipper and removing her arms. Paul knew for both their sakes, they needed to be out of those clothes immediately. He turned away and walked to the bedroom to grab blankets. By the time he made it back to the kitchen, she’d managed to get out of her two coats, pull her shoe and sock off of her good foot and was finishing unwrapping her splint on her injured foot.

“I can’t – get my – snap un-done.” She smiled pointing to her waist. A severe shiver wracked through her body at the same time.

Paul reached with his numb fingers but couldn’t get the grip enough to pull the snap apart. He looked at her admittedly shocked at his own lack of strength.

She shrugged her shoulders and grabbed the hem of his stiff shirt and pulled it up over his head. His arms followed naturally and he was rid of his shirt. His own uncontrollable shivers shot through his body, making him

move with jerked motions. He bent over and tugged at the frozen laces on his shoes. It was no good so he kicked his shoes off one foot at a time. He slid his fingers into his socks to inch them off his numb feet. They were so stiff they held their shape once on the floor.

Paul and Sierra both began laughing at the sight of the socks. Laughter lightened the mood. He helped her remove her shirt, draping a blanket across her front for modesty, and then he set back to work on the snap. His fingers were regaining feeling a bit, but with that came incredible burning and pain. Finally her snap released.

She stood on one leg, held on to her blanket with one hand and placed the other on the countertop nearby to steady herself while he peeled her jeans off of her. Frozen blue jeans were quite amazing. Sierra was sure the pants would be able to stand by themselves once they were off her.

Paul worked her hurt leg out of her jeans while she balanced on her good leg. His eyes zoomed in on her bruises down her upper leg. He'd seen them before, the first night when he'd removed her other frozen clothing, but they didn't look any different. He pulled the pants down to her knee on her good leg and helped her sit back on the chair to remove it the rest of the way.

"You'll warm faster if you take off your underwear too.



I'm not going to do that for you, sorry." He smiled and turned around.

Her cheeks flushed with heat. She wiggled her self around until she was able to get her panties off and unclasp her bra to remove it. Then she thought back to the first morning when she awoke in his bed. She was still wearing her bra and panties. He'd undressed her, but hadn't taken everything off. Such a gentleman. Now, she watched his back as he removed his pants and underwear, completely baring his body. He reached forward and grabbed his blanket and flung it around his back, covering his perfectness. He turned around and saw her face.

"Watching me undress?"

"How could I n-not? It's a girl's duty to notice a man."

Paul noticed her emphasis on the word 'man', and his heart sped up a notch. Instead of sitting down beside her, he opened a cupboard and pulled out a coffee pot. He took the bucket next to the stove and stepped outside to fill it with snow for water. His feet were so numb he didn't even feel the cold of the snow. He brought the bucket back inside and began the melting process. As the water melted he poured it into the coffee pot until he had enough to brew a batch. He scooped some granules from the can and set it on the stove.

“We haven’t eaten anything today, and then we go and use all our available energy on keeping our bodies warm.”

He cuddled with Sierra while they waited for the coffee to percolate. After about an hour of warm liquid in their tummies and breathing in the steam, their shivers were better under control.

“How did you end up in the creek?” Paul asked as he filled her coffee mug again.

“A car stopped by the road. Someone got out and it scared me, so I ran and fell into the water.” She smiled at him, “And then you found me.”

“I thought the car picked you up. It scared me. I thought I’d lost you.”

Sierra leaned her head on his shoulder. The thought of losing him scared her too.

“Now I know how you felt being in Slater Lake. I’ve never been so cold in my entire life.” Paul turned his head to hers and kissed the top of it. “I wonder what our temperatures are.”

“Cold.”

“Yeah. I’ll hang up our clothes so they can dry and see if there is anything for us to wear in the mean time.”

Hours later, they lay down on the thick rug in front of the fireplace with full tummies and warmed souls. Paul had pulled the sheets off of a bed and they both wore toga style gowns. They hadn't completely warmed up yet, but the crackling fireplace and each other's company was helping.

"Can we sleep right here tonight?" She asked.

"You bet." He rolled over to her and snuggled up against her back. Body heat was the most wonderful thing in the world. Or perhaps it was only Sierra's body heat.

"What's going to happen to us, Paul?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will someone find us here? Or will we need to walk out to the road?"

"There's a phone, if I don't hear from them I'll call after a couple of days."

"A couple of...days? Whatever will we do with our time here, all alone, in this cabin?" she asked playfully.

Paul hugged her and tried to ignore the growing want inside him.

"Paul, tell me more about your family."

“What do you want to know?”

“Your grandma is intriguing. What’s her history?” Sierra turned on her side to see Paul’s face. She loved watching his expressions as he spoke.

“Well, I grew up on my Grandma’s stories. She would tell them to me at bedtime, but they never put me to sleep. They were always too exciting. My grandmother was born in Slaterville, before this portion of Rendier was sold to Baylend. She was one of the first women of her day to work with King Louis and his security task force. Her position dealt with finding threats to the throne. She viewed the army general as a threat but King Louis wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Let me guess, Alexandar Rawlings was the general?”

“You know this part; he’d climbed the ranks of leadership to where he advised King Louis on strategic plans. He convinced him that selling the top portion of Rendier would be in the best interest of the country. He persuaded the king’s decision and in doing so, King Louis lost many devoted countrymen. Alexandar worked against the king further and began to win the people over to his side. He executed a grass roots campaign and covertly turned the country against their ruler; so when King Louis gave out the order to have Alexandar removed, the people rose up and ousted King Louis from power, putting Alexandar in his place.

“Alexandar even held a popular vote to pacify the reluctant citizens. That’s when his true dictatorship emerged. He padded the vote to his favor and presented a humble façade to the people in his acceptance speech. He tried to appear like a leader who wanted the best for the country and he kept that image for a little while.”

“If he had to pad the vote it meant he wasn’t the popular vote.”

“Right. The ones who didn’t want him as the ruler began fleeing the country. And that’s where my grandma comes in. Once the king was removed from the palace, Alexandar filled all the positions with his own men. My grandma lost her job but felt glad to be alive. She was aware Alexandar suspected her dislike and her capabilities. She believed he’d be capable of murder if it would secure his position and she was right.

“Pretty soon, Alexandar closed the border but that didn’t stop people from fleeing. It just became more difficult. His true colors started to show and the people now wanted him removed from power, but it was too late. Like being lured into a spider’s web and thinking it’s safe; then finding out you’re stuck and in danger. Alexandar began televised executions of traitors and expatriates. He formed a team to root out rebel groups and bring them to justice. That was probably the time frame he began the Montgomery hunt you spoke of.

“My grandfather, Paul Bronson, whom I was named after, was one of the victims of the dissident raids. He was murdered.”

“I’m sorry, Paul. I didn’t know. I hadn’t even thought about your grandfather.”

“You don’t need to be sorry Sara. He died before my parents married. My grandma was the target, but he took the bullet. She immediately took her situation to the capital of Baylend and was responsible for getting the new laws put into place for Slaterville and Northtown. Up to that point, this was kind of a neutral zone. People didn’t really belong to Baylend, but at the same time didn’t belong to Rendier either. She raised awareness to our situation and how the government of Rendier was killing new Baylend citizens.

“Baylend still didn’t know exactly what to do, but they came up with was a basic set of laws which prohibited Rendierians control in Baylend, which should have been in place all along after the purchase. Law enforcement increased and arrests became top news; for a while.

“Alexandar’s presence in Slaterville became less and less. And at the same time, the crossing methods became more difficult. Difficult equals dangerous and expensive. All half-way houses and anyone else dealing with defectors had to look out for their own families. Their safety became top priority. That’s when my father dug the tunnel. He’d

finished his degree in civil engineering and was newly married to my mother. He designed the tunnel and dug it personally. My mother and grandmother hauled the dirt and rocks out bucketful by bucketful for months. They hauled it in the back of their pickup truck to the hills to dump. They didn't want anyone to know what they were up to. They didn't house crossers during those months.

“My grandma was pleased with their new crosser room and escape tunnel. She felt her family would be safe continuing their business. She had no intention of ever quitting.

“Evidently, everyone had the same tenacity as my grandmother and Alexandar was assassinated. Reginald, age thirty-one, took the power. Grandma didn't know a whole lot about Reginald, only that he was Alexandar's son so there was no reason to believe he would be any different. She's always believed that a man with complete power will eventually misuse it.”

Sierra nodded her head.

Paul thought for a moment about what Sierra had fled and who had given her all the scars on her back. His grandmother was right.

Sierra's body wracked with a quick shiver and Paul pulled her closer. “Let's get some sleep.”

The next morning, light filtered through the dark drapes adding to the warm ambiance of the cabin. Sierra looked around and felt safe, secure and very hungry. Her movement awoke Paul who slept beside her.

“Good morning, my handsome prince.”

“Maybe a frog, but not a prince,” he muttered back.

“Then I’ll kiss you and make you into a prince.” She leaned forward and kissed his lips gently, she pulled back to look him in the eye. “Hmm, it didn’t seem to work. I better try again.”

Paul laughed and tickled her sides. He rolled her on her back and paused a moment to look her in the eyes. “Sara, I’ll be your prince if you’ll have me.” He leaned closer and took her mouth in a kiss that spoke of respect and admiration. He pulled back and said, “Was that your stomach or mine?”

“Both.”

They dressed and together prepared a modest meal with the limited supplies in the cupboard. As they sat at the small table, eating their breakfast, Sierra said, “This cabin should be a sanctuary and not just a half way point. It should be equipped with food, medical supplies, basic clothing and other survival items.”



“I totally agree. My father is putting me in charge of the cabin once you...”

“Once I what?”

“After you’ve moved on.” Paul said quickly.

Ignoring the pain of impending separation Sierra said, “Well, I think there should be a solid cement shelter with food and necessities for two weeks.”

“Like a bomb shelter?”

“Yes. If someone could hide for two weeks or perhaps longer, it would be a huge security comfort.”

“I don’t know, after two weeks, I think the bad guys would still be looking for you.”

“My case is different. Reginald won’t stop until he has my body, dead or alive. But not all your crossers are so directly involved with the dictator like I am. I think the whole cabin should be able to sustain four people for four months, not two weeks. Food would be slim pickings at the end of the fourth month, but four months is a long time. One thing’s for sure, the whole crossing system will need to change and become more secure or else the crosser homes will disappear all together.”

“I agree.”

“I can’t believe the risks your family takes on by housing people like me. I sure hope your family is ok. All that noise and crashing we heard before we entered the tunnel scared me and I’m sure it worried you.”

“Yes. But it’s unlike Reginald’s men to harm the people housing crossers. They are Baylend citizens now and technically the Rendierian patrol has no jurisdiction here. And our police stay neutral unless the patrol breaks the law, like raiding a home.”

“Things slacked off since Martha went to the capital all those years ago,” Sierra said sadly.

“Yeah, they have.” Together they cleared the dishes and cleaned up.

“Paul, it’s a little cold in here, can we start the fire again?”

“No. We can’t have smoke coming out of a cabin that’s supposed to be empty. We will huddle around the oven, if we have to, until tonight. Then we can make another fire. For now, I’m going to go outside and check the perimeter to make sure we are still safe.”

Outside, Paul walked through the freshly fallen snow. Their tracks from the night before were covered nicely and he took care to brush his own with a pine bough. He skirted

the edge of the road for a few hundred yards, looking for tire tracks but found nothing. On his way back to the cabin he was careful to step in his own footprints and brush them out behind him, leaving no trace.

Once he made it back to the cabin, he chopped wood for the evening fire and picked up all traces of wood splinters that landed on the porch. He hauled the wood in and cleaned the porch immaculately.

Sierra found some hygiene supplies while he was outside and they took turns washing and cleaning up. The rest of the day was spent trying to relax. They took naps in shifts and took turns melting snow and watching the road through a slit in the drapes. Although, they didn't have a plan if anyone came to the cabin. It was the end of the road, literally. If anyone found them here, they'd be captured.

Sierra thought about how the emergency cabin could be better. An alarm system could alert them to intruders and they wouldn't need to stand guard all day. Other thoughts went through her mind as she sat at the window like how she would operate her own crossover house someday. She had to do something to fight against the Rawlings' reign.

Later in the evening, they ate tuna fish on homemade biscuits and sat in front of the crackling fire.

“Do you realize tomorrow morning will have been forty-eight hours since the raid?” Sierra asked Paul.

“Yes. I wonder why no one has come by or called. If we still haven’t heard from anyone by tomorrow afternoon, I’ll call home.”

“Paul, what are you going to do with your life after I’m relocated?”

“I always thought I’d go north to Densfield and attend the University, but that was before I met you.”

“Uh-oh, this doesn’t sound good.”

“Before I found you, I couldn’t wait to get out of the house. I felt so useless and under appreciated. But you made my tiny world open up.”

“Me?”

“I draw so much strength from you and your bravery.” Paul complimented her.

“I wouldn’t call it bravery. More like grabbing for straws. I only did what I thought was the only choice.”

“Yes, but you acted. You tried to get out of the life. You are covered with scars of defiance. You could have perfect blemish free skin if you only gave in to the demands placed

on you.”

“You think I don’t dwell on that every day? My father could still be alive if only I had said yes to Victor. No way! I would never marry Victor! But now my father is dead because of my stubbornness.”

“Your father’s death was not your fault, Sara. Whoever pulled the trigger is to blame. Your bravery to say no to the most influential person in the whole country is what motivates me.”

“I still disagree about it being bravery. It was just common sense. I’ve heard Victor speak of genocide as if it is a reasonable solution to subdue the people; a small price to pay to keep the people under control. I also watched how he treated his mother and how Reginald treated his wife. She is a nobody. In fact, I only saw her a couple of times while I was at the palace. I didn’t want to become her. I didn’t want to become the mother of the next horrible man to take the throne of power. I’d rather be over here fighting against them.”

“Bravery. I rest my case.”

“So, you didn’t really answer my question. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

“I want to spend the rest of my life defying the dictator. I want to be current on all developments in Rendier, to know

all about the resistance fighters and help them if I can. The Rawlings' rule must be brought down but if I can't bring it down, at least I can help people escape him."

"We want the same thing then." She looked at his lips as she said the words. He'd knocked down the last remaining walls around her heart, what was left of them anyway. Her heart belonged to him and she rather suspected he knew it by the way he was looking at her. He didn't have silly girls beating down his door, although if he'd attended the Academy he'd have given Riley and Victor a run for their money. Knowing the way he truly felt in his heart made him all the more attractive. She realized that fact the moment he opened up on the first day and shared his fears with her. She loved him.

She loved him and wanted him to know it.

She looked back up to his eyes and felt her face heat up. Her heart raced so hard she thought it might explode right out of her chest. His eyes were on hers and his intent in his eyes. He leaned forward and cupped her cheeks with his hands. Gently he pulled her face toward his. Her mouth parted and her eyes closed in anticipation.

## Chapter 10

She waited for his kiss but it didn't come, instead, he pulled her into an embrace and leaned his head on hers.

“Sara, I’ve never had a serious relationship before. I don’t know what I’m feeling for you.”

“What do you feel?”

“Confusion. I don’t ever want to lose you. It scared me terribly when I couldn’t find you last night. I saw you slipping away and I had to fight like hell to keep you with me. I want you with me. I want to be with you. There is a difference between those two statements. I would have never thought it possible to fall in love in only a matter of days, but... I mean... I would have teased anyone who claimed to be in love after knowing a person for so short of time. It’s just not possible, is it? We don’t even know much about each other.”

“Maybe you are drawn to me because of my situation. You saw my injuries and took pity on me. Is that it? You feel sorry for me?” She looked up at him still in his embrace.

“I do feel sorry for you. I want to protect you; I want to hold you close every night like I already have. I need you, with you my life has purpose.”

“But Paul, there’s more to life than just holding someone every night and protecting them through the day.”

“I want to comprehend everything about you, and show you my world. I’ve lived a carefree life, exploring and

enjoying nature. I want to do that with you. This summer I'm to show you the magical place where the creek we just about froze in falls into the canyon.

“Sara, I never realized I've been looking for the right girl, but I have. No one has successfully turned my head before. I've had no desire to be close to anyone till now, till you. Till I pulled you out of the hole in my floor and you landed on top of me. When that happened, my mind said to me, 'there you are'. I've waited my whole life for you. Now I can start my life, with you. I love you, Sara. I really do. I guess I'm not that confused after all.”

She stared into his eyes and smiled. His expression of love was all she needed to hear. “Paul, I've loved you since day one and I'll love you to the last and beyond.”

He swiftly took her mouth in a kiss stopping her heart all together. Dreams, aspirations, fulfillment all flooded into her. She wanted every moment to be like this one. Her hands and arms wrapped around his neck and she deepened the kiss. His hands urgently caressed her back and neck in an uncontrollable fervor. She moved her lips to his cheek and on back to his ear, kissing a trail along the way. She began moving her lips down his neck and was pleased when he arched his neck to allow her more skin to kiss.

He whispered something and she noticed his body had



tensed up. Looking up at his face she saw his strained expression.

“Sara, we can’t do this, not here, not like this,” he ran his thumb tenderly down the side of her cheek.

She tilted her head in confusion.

“It’s not right. Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to and all, but we can’t.”

“But I want to.”

“You’ve never done this before.”

“How do you know that?”

“You are engaged to Victor. Reginald wouldn’t allow you to marry his son if there was any doubt. Producing an heir is the most important thing on Reginald’s mind. He’ll want to make sure the heir is definitely Victor’s. Am I right?”

“Yes.” She lowered her head. “I’ve had several exams to satisfy Reginald.”

“When the time is right and we are certain you are safe from...”

“I’m safe in your arms. That’s all that matters to me.”

“And I’ll keep you safe the best I can, but even I know my own limitations. We are in hiding and that means you are still in danger of being found and taken back. Your virginity may be the only thing that keeps you alive, if you are captured.”

“My last name holds too much importance for Reginald to discard me.”

“I wouldn’t bank on that. I won’t put you in that kind of position.”

Sierra sighed knowing he was right. “Will you just hold me tonight?”

They laid back and he held her close. “We’re going to free you from this unwanted obligation. Then you and I can enjoy life together.”

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Greg dialed the phone and waited for the other end to be answered.

“Talk to me.” Victor’s urgent voice made Greg nervous.

“I haven’t heard from him yet, but,”

“Then why are you bothering me?”

“I remembered they have an old cabin in the mountains. I drove up there to see if that’s where they went, but it was empty.” Well, Greg didn’t actually see the cabin itself, but he drove to the road that went to the cabin and didn’t find any tire tracks, so why drive down the road, right? Victor certainly didn’t need to know.

“And?” Victor pressed.

“And nothing. They weren’t there.”

“So, let me get this straight. You call to tell me you haven’t found them, and they aren’t at the cabin you just remembered they own. Has your brain turned to mush? Do you think I want to hear anything other than ‘Hey Vic, I found her’? Don’t call me again until you have news I can use!”

Arrogant son of a dog biscuit! Greg slammed the phone down. If it wasn’t for the enormous amount of money his parents were being paid by Reginald, he’d go after this little stick in the mud himself. The world certainly wouldn’t miss him.

Greg ate another of Elsie’s cookies savoring every bite. He would certainly miss these scrumptious goodies when his family moved, and they would have to move the moment Sierra was found. Otherwise they’d have a lynch mob chasing after them.

But, what if they never found Sierra? Would his family

still be forced to move? The only people at present who knew of their double handedness were the Bronson's and they could be removed easily enough. Paul probably didn't know nor Sam. If the three adults were dead, Greg's family could go on living in Slaterville and draw the large wage from Reginald. Greg would play the supportive best friend for the soon to be grieving Paul. It could work.

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The next day began the same way as before. Paul and Sierra made breakfast and cleaned up sharing smiles and unsaid words between them. Since the revelations which came about the night before, the two of them were looking at each other through different eyes.

For Paul, being around her was near torture. He wanted to hold her, be near her and kiss her. But he knew he wouldn't be able to control himself if he started that again. It was hard enough last night to reign in his hunger for her.

She needed his protection. He watched as she hobbled over to the kitchen for a drink of water. She could put some weight on her foot now. She was healing. After enough time, her bruises would heal and disappear. Her back would probably always have a degree of scarring, but most of the injuries would fade with time.

Part of protecting Sierra included caring for her basic needs, and they needed food. Paul decided at three o'clock he would call home. He had to find out what was going on and why his father hadn't come to get him yet.

Greg Bidell paced the floor of the kitchen nervously. Any second, Victor might call for an update and Greg had nothing. He'd been certain Paul would call home by now, but no. If only Victor had raided when he'd first known about Sierra, then Greg wouldn't be in this situation right now.

The phone rang, startling Greg. "Hello?"

"Greg?" Paul's voice sounded on the other line.

Finally! Oh, there is a God! "Yeah man, where are you?"

"Why are you at my house?"

"This whole raid thing turned the entire town crazy, man. My parents and yours are in the other room talking with the sheriff."

"Can you get one of them please?"

"Yeah, hang on."

Paul put his hand over the receiver end, "The sheriff is at my house talking to my parents and the neighbors about

the raid. My friend Greg answered the phone. It sounds pretty crazy there.”

After a few more seconds Greg got back on the phone. “They are really busy but your father says to come on back now.”

“Can’t he come to the phone?”

“Well, he just went out the front door with the sheriff but hang on and I’ll go try to grab him.” Greg pulled the phone away from his ear and held it on his lap for twenty seconds.

“Paul, he said to tell you the danger is gone and to come on home.”

“The danger’s gone?”

“Yeah.”

“I sort of can’t come back. Our car died.”

“No problem, dude. I’ll come get you.”

Paul didn’t feel good about this at all. “Greg, have my father call me when he gets back in.”

“Oh, alright. What’s the number?”

“He knows the number.”

“Ok then, goodbye.” Greg said and hung up the phone. What did Paul mean by ‘he knows the number’? Did that mean Paul is actually at the cabin? Or are there other locations with phone numbers commonly known to their family?

Greg grabbed a butcher knife from the knife block and walked into the front room where Zachary, Elsie and Martha sat on the couch. He stood behind them. The two guards across the room held their automatic rifles at the ready in case any of them got any ideas. He had to try again to get information out of the three before Victor called.

“Zachary, where would your son run to in the event of a raid?”

Zachary said nothing.

“It doesn’t matter, you don’t need to tell me. I’ll find out my own way.” Greg grabbed Elsie’s hair and yanked her head back quickly and placed the butcher knife at her throat. Elsie screamed and Zachary moved to fight back but the armed guards intercepted him.

“Wait! Don’t hurt her!” Zachary sat back and conceded the possible whereabouts of Paul. “We usually run to Northtown to a hotel there. Of course it depends on the time of day where we stop to hide.”

“What does that mean?”

“If its early in the day, we drive further up the road.”

“Where else do you hide crossers?”

“No where else.”

Greg yanked Elsie’s head back a little further and she let out a gasp.

“Are you sure there isn’t a place that starts with a ‘c’ and ends with ‘abin’?”

“Are you talking about our vacation cabin? Why would he go there? There aren’t any supplies or much food to care for a crosser.” Zachary hoped he sounded convincing. “Besides, the cabin is on a dead end road. It would be suicide to hole up in the cabin.”

Greg let go of Elsie’s hair and she let out a muffled sob. He walked to the guards and whispered something to them and then went out the front door.

Greg climbed into his car and drove toward the cabin, cursing all the way. Would Paul have gone all the way to Northtown? There weren’t many hotels in Northtown; it wouldn’t be too difficult to find him there. The cabin was definitely a bad choice and it would be foolish to hide there, like Zachary said. Still, this was Paul he was dealing with; inexperienced, too trusting and overpowered by his



emotions.

Greg made a quick, most likely rash decision as he neared a gas station along the highway. He pulled over near the pay phone and got out of his car. Dropping in his coins, he called Victor.

“You better have good news for me, Greg.”

“I’m on my way to pick them up. How soon can you meet me at the Gas n’ Grub along the outlet?”

“One hour.”

“Alright, I’m in a yellow sports car. Watch for me.”

Victor hung up and Greg slowly replaced the receiver on the hook. He really hoped they were at the cabin. He climbed back in his car and peeled out of the parking lot, cutting off a car as he headed west.

As Greg stopped his car at the unmarked turnoff to the cabin, his heart dropped to his stomach. No tracks. He got out of his car and stared into the trees to look for smoke rising or to listen for any tell tale sounds of life. Nothing. Damn.

He got back into his car and debated whether or not he should drive to Northtown. He decided not to. Why waste any more time searching when he could coerce the

answer? He'd already blown a half hour as it was. He flipped his car around in the snow and headed back to town.

When Greg entered the Bronson home, he sat in an arm chair adjacent to Zachary.

"You are going to call your son and tell him exactly what I tell you to say."

"I don't know where he is."

"He said you know the number to call." Greg pulled the phone over to Zachary.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Look, Zach, I know you do. I may seem young to you, but it won't stop me from killing your wife and mother to get the answer."

Zachary looked over to the two most important women in his life. They had been in this situation for nearly sixty hours. Their chances of survival were slim to none. He was definitely very proud of Paul for flying under the radar this long, but this was a stale mate unless Zachary called his son. The odds were in favor of Paul coming out of this intact and Sierra taken back to Rendier. There was always the slim chance of harm coming to Paul because of Zachary's decision. Slim to none that Paul would be harmed, slim to

none that they would live.

As he weighed the pros and cons in the overall situation, Elsie and Grandma Martha nodded at his unspoken concern giving him the courage to call.

He dialed the number and waited.

Paul sat on the couch nervously twisting his hands. Something didn't add up. Why would the sheriff be at their home two days after the raid? Why would the sheriff be there at all?

The phone rang slicing through the thick air of the cabin. Sierra startled on the couch and Paul ran to pick it up.

"Hello."

"Paul?"

"Dad, is everything alright?"

"Yes, everything's good. You can come back now."

"Is it safe?"

"As safe as it will ever be."

"Dad, our car died. We're stuck here."

“I’ll send Greg to come pick you up.”

“Greg? Why not you?”

“I’m busy right now. I’ll tell him where you are and he’ll be there in about twenty minutes. It will be alright, son. I’ll see you soon.” Zachary hung up the phone.

Greg scooted the phone away from Zachary. “Twenty minutes eh? So, he is at the cabin.”

“Yes.”

“There weren’t any tracks going in. I’ve checked repeatedly since the raid. They aren’t there.”

“Greg, sometimes what seems to be isn’t what really is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is the road the only way into the cabin?”

“Yes.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Are you saying there is another road in?”

“No. There isn’t another road but when you’re on foot,

you can walk through the trees. It would seem you made a judgment based on a very narrow assessment. Have you been so narrow in your assessment of the Rawlings' too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you honestly think they will let you live after you turn in Paul?"

"Victor needs me!"

"And without you he wouldn't be able to spy over here any other way? Come on Greg, broaden your assessment of the Rawlings family. You are replaceable. You are expendable. Turning in Paul won't secure your future, it will end it."

"You're just trying to scare me and it won't work."

"That's too bad you won't listen. Go pick up Paul and good luck."

Greg left the room and went into the kitchen and ripped the phone cord out of the wall and then stormed out of the house.

Zachary went to work on the two guards, trying to break them down and make them doubt the integrity of their boss. If he could succeed, he could get to the neighbors and call to warn Paul. One thing was for sure; he didn't have much

time.

“I love how the trees are weighted down with snow on every branch.” Sierra said to Paul as they waited on the porch. “It doesn’t seem possible any snow could gather on the branches with all the wind we had.”

“I think the wind died once we made it to the cabin. The snow fell straight down after that.”

“But now we have a beautiful sight in front of us, don’t we?”

“Yes, it’s beautiful. Still cold though.” Paul sat staring out at the winter wonderland. His mind reeled with anticipation. His father said, *‘it was as safe as it would ever be’*, but what did that mean? Did it mean Sierra would be relocated soon? Would she be whisked off to Densfield to assume a new name and identity while Paul was left in Slaterville to help the next crosser?

He would lose her, like Sam had told him, *‘You don’t go and get attached to crossers because they leave and never communicate with you again.’* His body filled with fear. What was wrong with him?! Paul knew exactly what the problem was; he loved her and there wasn’t anything wrong with that. He decided at that very moment wherever she relocated to, he’d go with her. He never wanted to be apart from her ever again.

Greg arrived in his sopped up coupe with the bottom dragging on the snow and his chained wheels spinning; not a good vehicle for winter driving.

“Hey guys, get in before you catch your death, as my mother always says.”

Paul slid into the center position on the front seat. He turned to help Sierra into the passenger seat.

Greg started to drive away from the cabin where inside, the phone was ringing.

“Thanks for picking us up Greg,” Paul said.

“No problem at all, man. Have you guys been here since the raid?”

“Pretty much,” Paul answered.

“Wow. Everyone was wondering what happened to you. The raids must have been successful because the military guys disappeared as quickly as they showed up, oh, and Sam resurfaced.”

“Really, is he ok?” Paul couldn’t believe he was asking Greg for information about his family.

“He’s fine. Oh, damn!”

“What?” Paul and Sierra asked in unison.

“Ah, it’s nothing serious. I only need to get gas soon. I don’t think I’ll make it back on this tank.”

Paul leaned over to look at the meter, “It looks fine to me.”

“You don’t know my car. It gets like two gallons per mile. Plus the gauge is wrong. We’ll stop at the Gas n’ Grub.”

The drive there was rather quiet with minimal talking and for some reason it disturbed Sierra. She caught Greg glancing over at her multiple times on the way down the mountain and it made her even more nervous.

“Here we are.” Greg pulled up on the passenger side of his car to the gas pump.

“I don’t like this Paul,” Sierra’s voice shook slightly as she stared toward the front doors of the convenience store.

“There’s nothing to be worried about. He’ll be done before you know it.”

“Paul, I love that you trust people, but something doesn’t feel right about this.”

They both stared out the front window at the large Trejo



Mountains in front of them. Rendier lay on the other side of the range. Paul looked over at Sierra who stared at the mountains.

“Don’t worry, Sara. Everything’s going to be ok.”

Greg finished pumping the gas and attached the cap. The fuel door snapped shut and they watched as Greg walked toward the building to pay for his gas.

As he pulled open the glass door of the gas station, a young man wearing a crisp black suit exited and handed Greg an envelope. Sierra gasped out Victor’s name and at the same time movement from all areas surrounding them caught their eyes simultaneously.

A trap! A well executed ambush, and Greg was behind it.

Paul immediately slid over into the driver seat and would have started the car except for the fact Greg had taken the keys with him. Sierra reached and locked her door before anyone could open it. Men dressed in black surrounded the car and she screamed as they smashed her window and opened her door. Paul’s unlocked door was pulled open at the same time and they were both dragged out in opposite directions.

Paul fought like he’d never fought before. One man was behind him with his arms wrapped around Paul’s arms and

chest. Paul reached up and held on his assailant's hands and bent forward quickly pulling the assailant off his feet. This move caused the man to flip forward, landing on his back. Another man came at Paul from the right and Paul slammed a swift undercut punch to his jaw, knocking him to the ground. In the meantime, he was rushed from behind by two men who knocked him down. Paul rolled on his back and kicked with all his strength. One man flew backward but the other had better fighting skills. Before Paul knew what was happening, the man grabbed his pinky finger and bent it backward toward his wrist, then he angled Paul's arm in such a way that it seemed to pull every muscle in his body to near tearing. The man flipped Paul on his stomach and bent his arm behind his back, all without releasing his hold on Paul's pinky. Four other men jumped on him to hold him down.

Sierra had been pulled out of the passenger side and she fought too. Only, her fight wasn't even remotely fair. Her petite frame and light weight body couldn't do much damage to her assailants like Paul was doing to his. She did manage to poke her finger in one man's eye and leave a trail of bloody lacerated skin down another man's cheek from her fingernails. She tried stomping on toes, but one can't do very much damage to steel toed boots.

She watched Paul fight triumphantly and she felt the pride rise up inside her. Then, she saw him taken to the ground and her fear overtook her. At the same moment,

she was forced down to the ground on her stomach with right side of her head pressed into the snow and gravel. A firm hand held her head down while someone's knee restrained her shoulders.

“Paul!” she screamed.

Paul heard her and fought with the five men restraining him. He was able to turn his head to see her scared face for a fraction of a second before seeing the front of a military boot come flying into his face. He heard her scream his name in agony and then he heard screaming no more.

Sierra's face hurt from the freezing snow and her shoulder felt like it was dislocated because of her arm being twisted behind her back, but it was nothing compared to the ache of watching Paul get kicked in the face. He went unconscious immediately and she cried. She cried even harder as she watched the limited viewing scene play out under the car. Several booted feet began kicking her precious Paul in the gut. She screamed for mercy for his sake and was comforted only by the fact he was unconscious and couldn't feel the pain of the beating. The men continued to beat on him and she cried uncontrollably. She would become responsible for another good man's death.

A vehicle pulled into the parking lot in front of Greg's sports car and Sierra was lifted to an upright position. She

couldn't see Paul any longer, only the men who were still pounding on him.

“Stop! Stop hurting him, please!”

“Sierra, he is an enemy to my father. He deserves to die.” Victor had come to her side and spoke very calmly. “Any defiance is punishable by death.”

“If he dies, I die.”

“How Shakespearian of you. You've always been quite dramatic that way.” Victor waved his arm and the men stopped their attack on Paul. “Now, we leave.”

Sierra was dragged across the parking lot by two strong men. Her feet dug into anything and everything to try to stop her advance toward the black limousine. She was pushed into the vehicle and the door shut before she could get out. The other door opened and Victor climbed in along with two guards who sat across from them.

She instantly flew toward Victor with the rage of one thousand venomous vipers. She was pulled up short by the bodyguard's arms around her waist. “Let me go! Let me kill him! What's the matter Victor? Afraid of a girl? Can't hold your own? Had to have Daddy find me because you can't stand to be abandoned at the altar?”

“Sierra shut your mouth. You're only embarrassing

yourself.”

“You don’t like hearing what I have to say? It must be true then!”

“This little escapade has set our time schedule behind. You and I should have been married already but if he’s already had you then I don’t want you. I’d simply ask, but I can’t trust your answer. So, we’ll take your little boyfriend with us so that when I find out he took what was mine, I can kill him.”

“He’ll always have my heart, Victor, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” She heard the distinct rip and tear sound that can only come from Duct Tape. She turned to look, only to be silenced by the sticky tape across her mouth. Her hands were also bound behind her.

“I like it when you’re quiet.” There was a knock on the outside of Victor’s window. He rolled it down an inch.

“Sir, what should we do with him?”

Victor stared at Sierra for five long seconds and then turned to the man, “Kill him. Find his parents and kill them too.”

“No!” Sierra tried to scream and made to move toward Victor only to be attacked by the two guards. They pushed her down on her side with her face shoved into the leather

upholstery. Outside, she heard four distinct gunshots and she was reduced to tears and sobs for Paul.

## Chapter 11

It had been several hours since Paul was shot. They had reached the palace and Sierra was placed in a secure room without windows. Her bindings had been removed before being locked away. She loathed being back in this life, being called Sierra, and having bad memories flood into her mind. Her father had died because of her and now the only man she'd ever love was dead too, because of her.

Her thoughts wandered to the little gas station and the memory of watching him abused. The four gun shots ripped through her even now. At least he was unconscious when they killed him. Had anyone collected his body yet? Was he still lying in the parking lot? Did his parents even know, and how would they take it?

Fleeing Rendier had helped her discover the life she wanted to lead. Paul helped her to find herself. She would miss him terribly, she already did. Paul would have wanted her to try to produce change from within the palace walls. She would do just that. More tears trickled down her cheeks.

The door opened and Reginald Rawlings entered along with Dr. Roth. Reginald walked over to her. "Sierra,

I'm so happy you are safe. And I see you've recovered completely from your attempts to starve yourself, so much so you were able to pull the wool over all our eyes and flee. I hope you've come to realize you can't escape your duty to this country."

She didn't say anything.

Reginald continued, "Dr. Roth will ascertain your virginity now. I would hope you guarded it with your life. I heard about the young man you were found with and how you had acquired quite an attachment to him."

Again, she said nothing. Dr. Roth helped her lie back on the bed.

"Reginald, would you mind stepping out during the exam?" Dr. Roth asked.

"I *do* mind. I'm not leaving."

Sierra turned her head to Reginald. "Would you at least turn around? I am uncomfortable with my future father in law seeing me undressed."

Reginald's expression surprised her and he actually turned around. Perhaps it pleased Reginald she'd accepted her fate. Dr. Roth performed the exam quickly and confirmed her status to Reginald.

“Good,” Reginald said and left the room.

“What is this splint for?” Dr. Roth asked her once they were alone.

“I hurt my foot when I crashed through the ice.”

“Through the ice?”

“Yes, it was so thin. But in the end it made easier to get closer to shore. Paul pulled me out the rest of the way.” Her voice choked up and tears filled her eyes.

“Paul?” Dr. Roth adjusted his horn rimmed glasses.

“They shot him. When they captured me, they shot Paul. He risked his life for me; he was so kind and caring. He called me brave, but it was really him who was brave. He helped me realize that life is worth living. I’ll never try to take my own life again. I’ll stand tall, for Paul, I’ll be brave and live against all odds.”

“He must have been something else to change your mindset so dramatically in just a few days.”

“He was one of a kind.”

“I think we should x-ray that foot of yours and check on your other wounds. I’ll get the approval to move you to the infirmary.”



Paul tried to open his eyes. He felt the cold stone floor against his cheek and tasted blood in his mouth. He'd been beaten severely but not killed. Why? Why beat someone so badly but not kill them? He tried to push his head up off the floor but the pain was too much. He observed his surroundings as much as he could with his limited range of motion. Stark cold room, perhaps a cell of some kind, large door, large guard—damn, he must be at the palace.

The guard exited the cell yelled down the hall, "He's awake!"

Paul heard the shuffling of feet down the hallway and watched black polished shoes walk into the room.

"Roll him over," the deep voice of Reginald Rawlings ordered.

The guards twisted him on his back roughly and Paul let out a yelp in agony.

"So, your name is Paul Bronson. You've kept Sierra hidden quite well for these few days, I must compliment you. She's sometimes a danger to herself; in fact, on numerous occasions she tried to end her life, I just can't have that happening."

Reginald walked over to the corner where a tiny slit of a window let in some light. “You know, Paul, I see a different light in her eyes now than before she fled. You are, I think, the source of that light. I believe as long as you are here in the palace, she will remain here too.”

Paul grunted out, “So you’ll keep me prisoner till she gives you an heir?”

“Well, that’s a wonderful idea, Paul. I’ll tell her you came up with that one all on your own. We’ll let her cling to some far fetched hope of escaping with you and hopefully in that time she’ll get pregnant with a son.” Reginald walked back over to Paul and squatted down beside his head. “But, we have a problem here. You see, my son has been robbed, by you.”

Paul narrowed his eyes in question.

“You stole his bride’s heart and she will never love him the way she loves you. So, I’m sure Victor will want to be compensated for his loss, and who am I to deprive him of it?”

“Compensated?”

“Yes, Paul. In whatever way he feels satisfied with. I’ll let him stretch his wings on this one. He will take my role someday and he’ll need to learn how to be tough and hardened to emotion. What better way to accomplish that

than by torturing for revenge? You will be his training for leadership. Once Sierra produces an heir, I'll have no use for her or you, and Victor will have complete free reign over you."

"Victor doesn't need training to become like you. It's you who needs to catch up to him. I'd watch my back if I were you."

Reginald's head flew back in laughter. He turned to the guard, "Take the prisoner to the infirmary and have Dr. Roth fix him up." His eyes trained back on Paul, "You must have your strength restored a bit to withstand Victor's rage, and we certainly cannot have you dying on us, now can we?"

Paul was dragged to his feet by two large men and taken down the hall to the medical room. He knew right away this was the same place Sierra had been taken to after her beatings and the man wearing the stethoscope around his neck was Dr. Roth.

"Reginald Rawlings ordered you to care for this prisoner," the guard announced.

"Put him over here." Dr. Roth pointed to an exam bed in the corner. The men dragged him over and sat him down. Dr. Roth gently pushed on Paul's chest to lay him down. He reached across and fastened a wrist restraint to his left arm and then the right. "What is your name?"

“Paul. Paul Bronson. Are you Dr. Roth?”

Dr. Roth’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, “My reputation precedes me. You two can wait outside the door. He’s not going anywhere.”

The guards exited the room and Dr. Roth looked Paul in the eye. “Where do you hurt the most?”

“My ribs, I can barely breathe. It hurts to be lying down like this. Can I sit up?”

“No. Paul, you need to listen very carefully to me. My position here is Reginald Rawlings’s personal physician. He trusts me and anything Sierra has told you about me needs... no, absolutely must be kept quiet.”

“Dr. Roth, I understand.”

“I may be rude to you at times and you may find yourself wondering if I’m who you think I am. Rest assured what Sierra told you will never change.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“She thinks you’re dead.”

“She does? You’ve seen her then? Is she alright?”

“You just missed her. I had her down for an x-ray of her

foot.”

“I missed her? How’s her foot?”

“Broken and healing crooked, probably because she can’t sit still long enough for it to heal.”

Paul smiled, that was definitely her.

“She thinks the world of you, Paul.”

His wide smile broadened even further. His ribs didn’t seem to hurt as much anymore. Love is the best painkiller.

“Paul, I’m going to level with you now, you are in for a long haul.”

“I know.”

“No, I’m not sure you do. You’ll be Victor’s personal punching bag for a while.”

“I understand doctor. When I found Sara and she told me a lot about her life here and the abuse. Her strength to survive will pull me through whatever lies ahead.”

“You keep thinking that when you’re being lashed, and you will be lashed.”

“I love her, Dr. Roth,” he admitted. “I’ll go through

anything necessary to try to help her.”

“You’re a good guy, Paul.”

“Likewise.” Paul wondered how old Dr. Roth was. He didn’t look to be more than about thirty-five and he didn’t even have gray hair. In Paul’s mind, doctors all have gray hair. The glasses fit the bill, but the age of the man didn’t match. What was it about Dr. Roth Reginald trusted so much?

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Several people entered Sierra’s room including Reginald, Victor, two guards and a priest. This did not look good.

“Well, come on, let’s not waste anymore time here,” Victor said impatiently.

The priest stepped up to the side of the bed and began reciting the verses of the marriage ceremony. When the time came for her to answer with ‘I do’, she did so. Victor slid a large ring on her finger and gave her a rushed kiss to which she didn’t respond to. It was done. She would go on to defy the Rawlings’ from within house.

Everyone left the room except for Victor.

“Alright Sierra, it’s the moment of truth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Time to make sure you really are a virgin.”

“You don’t trust Dr. Roth?”

“I don’t trust anyone.”

“Forget it; I’m not sleeping with you.”

“You don’t have a choice. You’re my wife now.”

“Just as I thought, marrying you would take away all my choices. It seems silly to me that a few words uttered by a specific man makes it ok for you to take me by force.”

“Those silly words make what we will do right in the eyes of God and the land.”

“Now you answer to God? Or the land for that matter? You don’t answer to anyone except maybe your father who owns the land and thinks he’s God.”

“Look Sierra, I don’t have to answer to my father, it’s you who has to answer to him. If he finds out you are refusing me, I think you know what you’ll have coming. Is that what you want?”

“What do *you* want, Victor?”

He had a strange expression come across his face. Almost as if no one had ever asked him what he wanted. He looked at her, "I want you." His youth and inexperience blazed out from behind his hardened exterior and she almost felt sorry for him.

"Do you really? Because I think you just don't want anyone else, namely Riley, to get me. I think you think you want me, but you really don't. I also believe your father wants me more than you do."

"That's sick."

"No, he wants my name. He wants his heir to be a Montgomery. Don't you realize your father's rule is failing? You are destined to take over a deteriorating leadership, one dependent upon my name. *My name*. It's the King and Queen scenario all over again."

"When I'm in power, this country will fear me. This is my father's problem. He's trying to make sure people approve of him. He's weak. I won't be like him."

"You're already not like him, Victor."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment. Well, go on then, do what you've got to do." She lay back on the bed with a bored look on her face.



“Can you at least try to participate?”

“Why? I’ll never have feelings for you. You’ll never hold any place in my heart because you killed Paul.”

“What? No, I didn’t.”

“Just because you didn’t pull the trigger doesn’t mean you aren’t responsible for his death.”

“He’s not dead, Sierra. He’s here in the palace.”

She sat up quickly with confusion and excitement all over her face.

“But you told them to kill him. I heard the shots!”

“The informant, they killed the informant. I told you I would be bringing Paul with us just in case he’d taken what was mine. Dr. Roth says you are physically pure, but it is obvious Paul has stolen your heart from me.”

“Even if I’d never met Paul Bronson, my heart would have never been yours.”

“Well, now you are legally mine and I will have you if even just your body.”

“I want to see Paul first. I want to see with my own eyes

he's alright. If you'll do that for me, I'll try to be more... accommodating."

"I'll do you one better, Sierra. I'll let you see him daily if that's what it takes to have you be willing."

She nodded. Willing but not wanting.

Victor walked to the door and said something to the guard who was outside. He closed the door and walked over to a chair in the corner. "They'll bring him up momentarily." Victor watched as Sierra sat up and preened her hair. She had a smile on her face and her cheeks had blushed naturally in anticipation for Paul's arrival.

Victor waited for a reunion that would anger him beyond measure. He didn't know if he'd be able to watch. Not that he really wanted Sierra; he only wanted the union so no one else could get her. She was spot on with her assessment. His father wanted her last name, but deep inside, Victor knew his father was weak. What kind of a dictator worried about pacifying the people? The people should be scared to death of their ruler, that's how it should be.

But something inside his gut twisted when Paul was brought into the room and Sierra rushed to him. She tried to hug him but stopped short at seeing his bandaged ribs. They said phrases like, 'I thought you were dead' and 'I

didn't think I'd ever see you again' and 'I'm so sorry'. They kissed briefly and Paul ran his hands up into her hair. He kissed the top of her head and told her he loved her. Of all the nerve! Saying something like that right in front of her husband!

Anger filled Victor's veins to the point he actually saw the color red. He began to feel physically ill when they started talking of escape. He stalked forward and tore them apart, "That's enough! Get him out of here!" The guards moved in and took Paul out of the room. Paul strained his neck to get one last glimpse of Sierra as she sat down on the bed. Victor's eyes met Paul's and as the door closed, he squinted to near slits as he said to Paul, "She's mine now."

The next day, Sierra sat all alone at the long dining table and pushed the food around on her plate. Her stomach rolled and tumbled with the anticipation of seeing Paul again. Somehow, they needed to escape.

"Well, there you are." Riley Stone entered the room and sauntered over to Sierra. He pulled out one of the ornate handcrafted chairs and sat beside her, "See, you weren't gone long. I told you it wouldn't work."

"Why are you bothering me Riley? Didn't you get the memo; I'm now Mrs. Victor Rawlings?"

He leaned forward as if what he had to say had significant importance. A sly smile crossed his face. "I can get you out of here, Sierra. I have it all figured out. I know how to hide you, protect you and reinvent you. You only need to come with me and I'll free you from this life."

"Why should I do anything with you, Riley? Last time Reginald caught us together like this, you stabbed me in the back to protect your own interests. You did it then, and you'll do it again if you have the chance."

"Don't you see it was for your own good I said what I said?"

"How was being beaten to within an inch of my life for my own good?"

"Humility."

"Leave me alone, Riley. I don't need or want you in my life. If you persist, I'll take this to Reginald myself."

"He won't believe you, but suit yourself. I think eventually you'll come find me and beg me to help you escape."

"I don't understand the relationship you and Victor have and I don't think you understand it either. Who in their right mind would continue to hang around the guy who stole his girl? And who with a lick of sense would allow the guy, whose girl he stole, to continue to see her? Yours is a

complicated relationship I'm happy to say I won't be a part of much longer."

"If you'd leave with me, we could both get out of it sooner."

"I'll be out of this soon enough without you! It's your fault I'm even here, Riley. I've never liked you but that didn't matter to you, did it. Then, your jealous friend decides he doesn't want you to be happy, so he takes me from you, even though you never really had me to begin with. My father died because you couldn't take a hint! I'm forced to live here because of you! Do you see how this whole situation is for me? I can't stand either one of you and yet here I am, stuck with both of you because you're too stupid to back out and he's too stupid to keep you away. However, without all this drama, I would not have crossed the border." *And found Paul*, "That is the one good thing to come of it all and it's good enough for me. Now, leave me, Riley."

"You will regret ever turning me down."

Sierra let out an exasperated sigh, rolled her eyes and shook her head as Riley left the room, and then hobbled down to the infirmary to speak with Dr. Roth about Paul.

"Sierra I'm glad you came, I need to speak with you as soon as I finish up with this patient. You can wait in my office."

A few minutes later, Dr. Roth came in and said in a low whisper, "I'm working on something that will hopefully free you and Paul."

"A plan?" Her excitement was paramount.

"Yes. That's all I can tell you right now. Keep it quiet and don't talk to Paul about it. Act normally around Victor and be patient. It's going to take a little while."

"Victor promised me I would be able to visit Paul everyday."

"Your love for him is the only thing keeping him from being killed. They are so sure you'll end your own life if Paul dies."

"But we are going to escape before that happens aren't we?"

The door to the infirmary opened and their conversation ended.

Paul sat in his room with his back against the wall. His body still hurt in various places from his beating at the gas station but he tried not to dwell on it. His mind continually switched between his family and Sierra. He worried for their safety and for hers. Voices outside the door pulled him out of his trance.

“I am to evaluate the prisoner,” Dr. Roth said to the guard.

“Did you see her? Is she alright?” Paul asked after they were alone.

“Yes, she’s fine. She’s being treated well. Listen, I’ve got an idea and I need you to go along with it. This idea came to me after Sierra fled the first time. I figured it was only a matter of time before she was found and brought back here. Please don’t be offended by that assumption. It had nothing to do with you or your ability to hide her. I knew Reginald’s presence in Slaterville would turn up a clue and that’s all it would take.”

“It was my fault, though. I trusted my friend of ten years with the information about Sara. I’ll never trust anyone outside of my own circle again, well, except for you, Dr. Roth. I’ll never put her in danger again.”

“In this world, Paul, you can’t trust anyone, only your own gut instinct. Remember that.” Dr. Roth took a deep breath, “Now, let me paint a picture in your mind. When we know someone is dead, we move on, we have closure and gradually, over time, acceptance. When someone only disappears, we are more likely to spend the rest of our lives searching for them in the hopes they are still alive. So the trick here is to,”

“Make them think she’s dead.”

“Right. So, now you understand the goal of my plan, I need you to trust me on the rest. Do exactly as I say, alright? If it all goes to plan, we will all be free in a matter of days.”

“Tell me what you need me to do.”

“I have a few loose ends to tie up first, and then I’ll let you know. I’ll hurry as much as I can for your sake.”

“My sake, do it for Sara’s.”

“She’s not the one about to be beaten repeatedly.” Dr. Roth pulled out a pill of some kind and handed it to Paul, “Swallow.”

Paul, trusting Dr. Roth, swallowed the pill without water. “What was that?”

“A narcotic for the pain.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Dr. Roth didn’t say anything back, but the expression on his face appeared to be sorrow and sadness. Paul wondered what he was thinking. Dr. Roth walked to the door and knocked on it for the guard to open it. As soon as the door opened, Sierra came in.



Paul pulled her into an embrace carefully and she laid her head on his shoulder. He rested his cheek on her head and inhaled her scent. One of his hands smoothed her soft hair on her neck and shoulders. She smelled wonderfully and looked healthy and it did so much to buoy his spirits.

“Paul, are you alright?” she asked through her tears.

“I’m fine. How are you?” He pushed her away to arms length and searched her face while she answered him.

She diverted her eyes to his wrapped chest under his opened button up shirt. “It looks like I’m doing better than you,” she placed her palm in the center of his chest gently.

“Is Victor treating you good?” Paul asked her.

“I don’t have any new bruises if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Neither do I.”

“But he will,” Victor pushed the door all the way open and walked in with another large man. “It’s time for you to leave now, Sierra.”

“No! Please don’t hurt him!”

“I promised you I’d let you see him every day. You’ve seen him, now, go and you can see him tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do to him?”

“I’m not going to kill him, don’t worry love,” Victor tenderly brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

Sierra turned her head to Paul, wondering if he knew what was about to happen. She knew from her own experiences with Reginald that *‘not going to kill him’* meant *‘everything but kill him’*. Tears filled her eyes and her hand covered her mouth.

“It’s alright,” Paul said to her, “go on. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He winked at her and smiled.

Dr. Roth took her by the elbow and walked her out the door. The door closed with a thud and she dug her heels into the ground. “Sierra, we have to go.”

“No!”

“Be strong for Paul. He’ll be strong for you.” He pulled her down the hall to the medical rooms. *And then when they’re done with him, I’ll fix him up like I fixed you all those many times.*

She strained her ears to hear any beating or abuse from Paul’s cell, but heard nothing. It gave her a little comfort but not much.

The rest of the day, her mind dwelled on Paul. Some kind of a ceremony was taking place that afternoon, but she'd been so consumed with worry she missed out on the importance of it all.

In the throne room of the palace a large group of reporters with cameras and microphones had gathered. Sierra's handmaid had helped her into the elaborate gown and touched up her makeup and hair before being ushered into the large room with flashing bulbs.

Reginald and his wife sat regally in the two thrones with Victor standing at the side of his mother. Sierra's handmaid led her to Victor's side and Victor took her hand in his. She shot a look at him and he squeezed her hand, and then he leaned and whispered in her ear, "This is a very big moment for my father and you won't screw it up. Do you hear?"

She nodded.

"Now smile for the cameras as we make history. If you choose to be defiant, Paul will pay for it."

Images of Paul curled up in a ball on the floor of the cell flew through her mind and she plastered a fake smile on her nervous face and turned to the crowd. She listened as reporters questioned Reginald about her family lineage and his intentions of bringing her into the family. It amazed her

how Reginald went to such lengths to convince the people of Rendier he was a good guy. She knew the questions wouldn't be directed at her, so she really didn't have to pay attention to what was said. No way would Reginald risk her saying the wrong thing to tip off the public to her real life.

The name Montgomery was thrown around several times even with the accusation Reginald was only trying to win support. He, of course, pointed out the late Donald Montgomery had been his personal adviser up until he died a few months ago. Victor and Sierra had attended the same school and fell in love so when her father died, leaving her with no family, they offered her residency at the palace. Victor had already proposed, of course.

Sierra mentally rolled her eyes and wished she could shake her head but she knew Paul would suffer. The Rawlings' were good for their word; when they said they'd beat or kill someone, they did.

Sierra got the answer to her question about the delayed wedding when Reginald was asked about the threat on her life. Reginald told the reporter the insurgents were responsible for the planned attack and the person to blame had been apprehended. He told them the reason they decided to hold a private wedding was because of the possibility of unknown threats to her life.

She listened as Victor answered the question

addressed to him; were they planning on trying for an heir soon? Of course his answer included him pulling her hand to his lips and kissing it and saying, "If this press conference could wrap up, we'd get on that." Sierra's blush was genuine with the comment and of course the crowd cheered. But then again, it was mostly male.

The questions concluded and Reginald thanked everyone for coming. They all exited out of the room and Sierra threw a sad glance over her shoulder just as she was about to pass through the door and one single camera flashed capturing her emotion forever.

She spent the rest of the day in her room, hoping Victor would leave her alone. She wanted to go see Paul, but knew better than to try. Tomorrow would come soon enough.

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Dr. Roth pulled up to the curb in front of the morgue. He glanced in his rear view mirror, and then out his side windows. No one. He grabbed the black garbage bag from the passenger seat and got out of the car. Looking to the right and to the left, he walked to the door and entered.

"Dr. Roth, good to see you," Charlie, the morgue director, greeted him.

"You said you found good candidates for me?"

“Yes. The height you ordered for the female is dead on,” Charlie chuckled at the unintended pun and his large belly shook, “but the male is a bit short.”

“How much shorter?”

“Two inches, but other than that, they should work for you.”

“That’s fine. They will be lying down and I don’t think anyone is going to notice the height difference. Are their records clear?”

“Yes, the male is a convicted murder Reginald ordered killed yesterday. He hasn’t any family to claim his body and he’s on the docket for cremation. The female is a Jane Doe, a street urchin. I couldn’t find any information on her so she’s good to go.”

“I owe you one,” Dr. Roth said as he lifted the black bag to the table. “Will you help me dress them?”

An hour later, the two dead imposters were dressed and the female had a splint similar to Sierra’s attached to her leg. They placed a ring on her left finger matching Sierra’s new wedding set.

“Alright, I’ve got a guy who will pick up the bodies later tonight.” Dr. Roth handed a thick envelope of cash to the

director, "For your silence."

"You don't have to do that, John. I mean, I'll take it, but you don't have to buy my silence. It's yours one hundred percent."

Dr. Roth gave the man a heartfelt hug. "You know, once I'm situated, I'll help you and your family cross."

"Thank you, that means so much to me. Oh, John, one more thing, these people you are dealing with, even though they aren't on Rawlings' side, they're not always on the good side either. They draw their own lines in the sand if you know what I mean."

After leaving the morgue, Dr. Roth drove his yellow four door sedan to the address on the note card he'd been given. He was in the warehouse district where most of the buildings were vacant. He waited in the vehicle, as instructed, feeling nervous even though he knew he shouldn't, but it wasn't every day he met with the leader of the rebellion.

## Chapter 12

Dr. Roth watched as two men in dark clothing exited the building in front of him and approached his vehicle. One was a good six inches taller than the other.

“Dr. Roth?”

“Yes.”

“Leave the keys in your car and follow us,” the taller man ordered.

He did as he was told and exited the car. Suddenly feeling very vulnerable to attack, Dr. Roth stepped up his pace to fall in step with the two men. They held the door open for him to enter first and reluctantly he did so. The room he'd entered was plain and empty. Several doors lined the perimeter of the room, all closed. The two men stepped into the room behind him and immediately took him face first to the ground.

“What’s going on?” Dr. Roth struggled to ask.

“We need to make sure you are who you say you are.”

“So you think by checking my wallet you’ll find a valid ID? Who’s to say I didn’t have one made...what the ...” Dr. Roth was completely shocked by the fact his pants were being removed. He struggled with them not knowing what their intentions were. It became obvious other people had joined them in the room.

A voice said, “Look for it on his upper outer left thigh.”

Dr. Roth had a deep scar in that area but he didn’t have



any idea how these people would know. But if it proved his identity, then so be it. Soon, he was let go and he quickly pulled his pants up and fastened them. He turned around to see at least twenty men, all carrying automatic rifles. In the center stood a man with a certain air about him signifying leadership, or maybe it was just the fact he was the only one wearing a hat and not carrying a gun. He stood taller than most of the men in the bunch and his broad shoulders looked like they could handle most anything placed upon them.

This particular man began speaking, “Dr. John Randall Roth, Reginald Rawlings’s personal physician. The same man who poisoned the entire palace just a few days ago, save for a small handful of men who helped clear the way for Sierra Montgomery’s escape. I’m Clive B. Roberts. It’s an honor to meet you.”

Dr. Roth shook the hand extended toward him. “Is this how you greet all your guests? Public humiliation?” he smiled at Clive and adjusted his glasses.

“I don’t even need to explain how imperative it is our operations remain secret. I do apologize for any embarrassment you experienced.”

“How did you know about my, ah, scar?” Dr. Roth noticed Clive had several scars across his face and forehead.

“I know your history doctor. I’ve researched you thoroughly and in the process I discovered you spent time in a hospital in Baylend because of a car crash. You had to have your hip replaced. In this business, no one’s ‘word’ is good for anything. We need irrefutable proof.”

“Well, I’ve got something to talk to you about that will make you rethink your methods of positively identifying people. Irrefutable proof will take on a whole new meaning.”

“And that’s why I’ve invited you into our circle. Walk with me Dr. Roth.” The two of them entered one of the doors and proceeded down a long dimly lit hallway. A staircase at the end of the hall dumped them down a level and into a large room which held several desks and many people. Men, women and children, all dressed in rags and malnourished, stared at him.

“Doctor, as you can see, we need people like you on our side. Most of the men and women here are wanted by Rawlings for some reason or another. They can’t afford to flee across the border, like Sierra Montgomery, or they would.”

Dr. Roth didn’t like the tone of voice Clive used when he referred to Sierra. They entered a private office of sorts.

“Now, Dr. Roth, may I call you John?”

“Yes.”

“John, what is your plan and how may I assist you?”

“I plan on staging the death of Sierra and her male companion. I need an explosion to burn their bodies beyond recognition so I can use my medical training to make the identification.”

“You’ve got doubles?”

“They are ready to go at the morgue. The director is in league with me.”

“What medical records will you use to prove the male’s identity?”

“I’ll figure something out. Reginald trusts me, plus, Sierra’s double will be sporting an identical wedding ring and a splint on her leg. Any male found with Sierra would be easily accepted as the Bronson boy.”

Clive’s head tilted and his chin dropped to his chest.  
“Did you say...Bronson?”

“Yes.”

“A Bronson from Baylend?”

Dr. Roth hesitated a second, “Yes. His name is Paul.”

“He’s must be related to Martha Bronson. A grandson perhaps. Martha’s husband’s name was Paul.”

“I don’t know a Martha Bronson,” Dr. Roth admitted.

“And why should you? She would be in her seventies by now. How old is this boy, Paul?”

“He looks to be Sierra’s age.”

“What do you know about him? Is he to be trusted?”

“Sierra trusts him and that’s good enough for me. Is there more I need to know about Martha Bronson?”

“Nothing that concerns you at this time. How certain are you Reginald will believe your medical opinion?”

“He didn’t suspect me in the poisoning. He allows me full unsupervised contact with both Sierra and Paul.”

“Sounds like he trusts you.”

“He does.”

“Victor believes exactly what we want him to believe, but Reginald is a harder nut to crack. It relieves me to hear you’ve broken through Reginald’s shell.”

“What do you mean; you think you have control over

Victor?"

"We have someone on the inside feeding us information about Victor."

"How many men do you have in the palace?"

"Not nearly enough."

"But enough to make you think you have control over Victor? I'm not sure we are talking about the same Victor."

"We are. Our people are everywhere in the palace."

"Are they spying on me too?"

"A little, but it's for a greater cause."

"Your cause, or the best interests of the country?"

"You don't think our cause is in the best interests of the country?"

"I think the best interests of the country are so far out of reach you are trying your darndest to try to keep some kind of involvement and inclusion. I think your intentions are just that, yours."

"You doubt this organization?"

"If I saw actual organization here, I wouldn't doubt it."

“You know Dr. Roth, I’m not sure I get you. You are determined to defy Reginald, but you don’t want to be affiliated with our group, even though this group is what made your first plan succeed.”

“She almost died crossing the first time due to thin ice. But I’m thinking you knew the ice was too thin, didn’t you?”

“Crossing the border is risky even in the best of circumstances. She simply had to go, ready or not. If she’d died, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. ”

“That’s where you and I differ on opinions. My intentions are to get her safely across the border, alive. I believe yours are to just throw her across the border and away from Reginald’s reach.”

“Well, it’s clear you do not understand the intensity of the situation or else you would see things like I do.’

“Clive, what are your long term goals of this organization?”

“Is this an interview?”

“I’m just wondering what your objective is. Are you trying to remove Reginald? Are you trying to reinstate the monarchy? Or are you trying to place yourself in the hot seat?”

“Our short term objective is to get Sierra Montgomery out of the palace. Our long term would be to keep her out.”

“What have you got against her?”

“She’s a Montgomery.”

“And?”

“The last thing anyone wants, save Reginald, is a two headed indestructible monster. Her presence will undoubtedly elevate Reginald far above any level he’s imagined. Many people of this country are vacillating between sides. If Reginald keeps Sierra, we lose those people.”

“Are you going to kill her?”

“I’ve thought about it. There are certainly plenty of people in place who could take her out, but it would expose our presence in the palace. I’m sure Reginald is oblivious to it at this point and I don’t see the need to change that just yet, not when you’ve concocted such a grand illusion. No, I want to run with your plan, once again. But know this, if it fails and she is not transported across the border or if she is brought back, then yes we will kill her.”

The door opened and a small boy entered. Clive put out his arms to the boy who climbed up on his lap. Without

breaking stride, he said to Dr. Roth, "Sierra Montgomery is an evil force and must be removed at any cost. All our lives depend on it, even my son's." Clive squeezed the boy on his lap and Dr. Roth assumed him to be his son. "If there is any hope to be had for our futures, Sierra must disappear, one way or another."

"Do you have any men at the border?"

"We might."

"Well, I may need their help in order to get across it."

"I'll see what I can do. For now, you'll be dropped off at the palace. We will find a matching car with understudies to drive it away from the palace. Your car will be loaded with the bodies and will burn gloriously. All you have to do is report the escape of the two prisoners and we will take care of the rest. This way, you can remain in your simple station."

"What is your real long term objective?"

"Now doctor, we really don't like to put too many pots on to boil or else they all might burn. We focus on small attainable goals that help further our cause."

"Fine. You don't want to tell me or you really don't know. I'll be going then." Dr. Roth stood and walked to the door.



The next morning, Victor escorted Sierra to Paul. "You can have ten minutes alone or one hour supervised."

"One hour."

"Fine," Victor left the room but a guard stepped in and closed the door.

Paul sat at an odd angle with his shoulder resting against the wall. His head hung in defeat and Sierra felt such empathy for him it brought tears to her eyes. She knew this pose as she had done it herself several times. He'd been whipped and his back must be too sore to lie back. Couple it with his broken ribs and he couldn't lie on his sides or stomach either. The only other option was to prop himself up against the wall.

"Paul?" she half whispered and walked slowly to him.

He lifted his head enough to see her and one side of his face tried to smile, "I'm so sorry, Sara."

"For what?"

"I should have had more pity for your injuries when I found you. I should have tried harder to understand the kind of pain you must have been in."

“How could you have known? It is truly something you have to experience first hand. Besides, you have no complaints from me on how you cared for me.”

She watched as his eyes watered and she sat down in front of him pulling his head to her shoulder. “We’re going to get through this, Paul and be stronger because of it. Has Dr. Roth been in yet to help you?”

“He treated me yesterday.”

“I’ll get him to give you a pain killer. For what it’s worth, you probably won’t be beaten today.”

“Really, but I was looking forward to it.”

She looked him in the eye to see his full smile. She laughed a bit. “Don’t let them know you are enjoying this or they’ll step it up a notch.” She looked over her shoulder at the guard who watched with a grimace on his face. “There was a press conference yesterday announcing me as Victor’s new wife. Reginald loved being able to announce his son had married a Montgomery. It sickened me.”

“Go along with it. Don’t cause waves.”

“As hard as it is to do so, that’s what I’m doing.” She kissed his cheek.

The rest of their hour went by too quickly and she didn’t

want to leave. Dr. Roth came in as her hour ended. The guard ushered her out of the room and closed the door, leaving only Dr. Roth and Paul in the room.

Dr. Roth checked Paul's wounds and gave him medication, "Tonight, after dinner is served you need to start coughing like your throat is closing in. The guards will either call for me, or bring you to me. Either way works. Just try to be convincing with it, alright?"

"Then what?"

"You'll follow my lead."

"Alright."

Sierra entered the infirmary before dinner. "You wanted to see me?"

"Sit down Sierra."

"What's the matter?"

"Tonight is the night," Dr. Roth whispered.

"We're escaping tonight?" she asked excitedly.

"No, but the ball will start rolling in that direction. Things are going to look scary to you and its ok to panic and over react. It will help validate the situation all the more to

Reginald.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I really can’t talk about it. Just stick close to Reginald and Victor. You’ll know when it happens.”

“Why does this scare me more than the first time?”

Dr. Roth walked away from her thinking, *the first time will have been a walk in the park compared to this and you should be scared.*

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“Hey! Go get the doctor! The prisoner is choking or... something.” The guard looked back into the room to see Paul holding his throat and coughing terribly. Paul tried to get up and walk but staggered and fell to the ground. “Hurry up! His face is turning blue!”

Dr. Roth came running down the hall with his emergency bag. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t know. He just started coughing and gagging.”

Dr. Roth entered the cell and knelt beside Paul. Paul reached for Dr. Roth with one hand and his other one clasp his neck. Dr. Roth saw the fear in Paul’s eyes and watched as he tried to gasp and plead with him. He

reached in his bag, pulled out a syringe and injected it into his arm and immediately Paul's eyes closed and his body went limp. "I need help getting him up. Carry his legs; we need to take him to the exam room."

The guard picked up Paul's legs while Dr. Roth grabbed him under his arms. Together they hauled him down the hallway and put him up on the exam table.

"Grab that cart and bring it here," he ordered the guard and took Paul's blood pressure and lifted his eyelids. Paul's eyes were rolled back in his head. He gave another shot into Paul's arm and listened to his lungs for breath sounds. The guard looked on concerned.

"Should I get Rawlings?"

"Call up for him, but I need you to stay here."

Reginald sat at the large dining table with his family. It was new to him to think about family; to think about those who lived before him and those yet to come. Sierra and Victor would now produce an heir, securing the Rawlings' legacy in the history books. Gaining the much needed favor he needed with the influential population and with countries abroad, he'd go on to become the strongest ruler ever.

Pride filled his bosom and a smile crept over his face.

A servant entered the room and spoke in a low voice to

Reginald, "Sir, you have an urgent call from the infirmary. There is a problem with the prisoner."

Reginald pushed his chair back so abruptly, it startled everyone. He exited the door and took the call. "Don't know what happened, but he's dying sir," the guard said on the other end of the line. Reginald caught Victor's eye at the door and motioned for him to come immediately. No one, including Sierra, missed the urgent tone of the unspoken words.

It only took about thirty seconds for Victor and Reginald to get to the exam room. "You better keep him alive doctor," Victor snarled as they entered.

"I'm doing my best." Dr. Roth injected a third dose of epinephrine into his vein and began CPR. He instructed the guard to squeeze the air bag every so often; minute after minute ticked by with no pulse.

"Paul!" Sierra had followed them down to the infirmary to find Dr. Roth performing CPR on Paul. She panicked. Was this part of the plan? It looked all too real. She tried to rush into the room but the father/son duo caught her and held her back. "Dr. Roth, what's happening?" she half yelled, half cried.

"Get her out of here!" Dr. Roth ordered.

Two guards peeled her away from Victor and Reginald

and dragged her upstairs. Dr. Roth could hear her screaming all the way. If nothing else, her agony was genuine. Reginald couldn't possibly think this was a set up. Now, if only Paul would respond to the medication and come back.

"Is he dead?" Victor asked in what seemed like an irritated voice.

Dr. Roth still preformed chest compressions and the guard pumped air into Paul's lungs. This charade had gone on for seven minutes now. If he couldn't revive Paul very soon, he could suffer brain damage or not wake up at all.

Paul began coughing violently. Dr. Roth reached up and removed the mask and turned Paul's head to the side in time for him to vomit over the edge of the bed. The guard sidestepped out of the way and Victor let out a disgusted grunt.

"It's common for CPR victims to vomit because of all the air that's been forced into the stomach." Dr. Roth informed them.

"Is he going to make it?" Victor asked.

"It's too early to tell. He'll need to stay here over night." Dr. Roth informed Reginald. He worked methodically to insert an IV into Paul's arm to administer another dose of medicine.

“What happened?” Reginald asked.

“Allergic reaction; his throat closed off.”

“Bring Sierra back down so she can see he’s alive,” Reginald said to Victor.

Dr. Roth heard her voice echoing down the hall a few minutes later and watched as Sierra entered and limped over to Paul. He was still unconscious. “What happened Dr. Roth?” she asked through her teary eyes as she pressed one of Paul’s limp hands to her mouth.

The door to the exam room shut and the three of them were now alone. Dr. Roth grabbed her shoulders and guided her to a chair. He sat beside her and took one of her hands into his. He spoke to her in a solemn voice, “He reacted differently to the drug than I predicted. I’m so very sorry. He is breathing on his own and that says a lot. We will have to wait for him to wake up. Then we’ll move forward with the plan.”

“He’s going to be so angry with you.” She half laughed through her choked sob.

“Yes, he will. Especially because I think I broke another one of his ribs.” He smiled at her and handed her a small sack. “Wear this clothing tomorrow morning when you come to see him. You’d better go now so we don’t raise



suspicions.”

“Oh, Doc, what the hell?” Paul muttered as he woke after midnight.

Dr Roth walked over to the bedside. “You know, I worried you might not be able to pull off a convincing enough gag attack but you did pretty good. You could be an actor.”

“I don’t remember... where am I?”

“We’re still in the palace. I’m going to wheel you into the x-ray room and check out your ribs. Try to relax.”

“I feel like I’ve been run over by a train.”

“That’s quite a common feeling after having CPR performed on you.”

“CPR?!”

Dr. Roth unlocked the breaks on the bed and wheeled him into the adjoining room. “I drugged you, Paul, and accidently killed you. But don’t worry, I brought you back. No harm, except for the possibility of a broken rib or two from the chest compressions.” He moved Paul directly under the x-ray machine and placed the film canister under Paul. He stepped behind the wall and took the shot. After repeating two more times, he wheeled Paul back to the exam room.

Dr. Roth jammed the developed films up in the lighted board, "Yeah, two more cracked ribs, sorry about that, Paul. Let's get those taped up." The painful process of sitting up and wrapping tape took an hour, after which Paul's bed was raised up to a near sitting position for better comfort. After taking a stiff dose of pain killer, Paul dozed off till morning.

Before breakfast, Sierra rushed down to the infirmary to check on Paul. Gen. Steinman stood guard outside the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Rawlings," the General greeted her.

"Ugh, don't call me that. I would like to see Paul. I assume he's inside, unless you have another high profile prisoner you're guarding."

Gen. Steinman didn't look amused, but turned and opened the door for Sierra. "Dr. Roth, is the prisoner awake?"

"Not yet, General, ah Sierra, come in." Dr. Roth turned to the General, "Your services are no longer needed, Gen. Steinman. I've secured the prisoner."

"Reginald ordered me to guard the boy; it's not up to you to dismiss me." Gen. Steinman was a military man to

the bone. His perfect posture and immaculate uniform were indications to how dedicated he was to his position.

“Yes, it is up to me, because I’m the one who asked Reginald to place you outside my door. I no longer need your services, you are dismissed.”

“I must hear the order from Reginald.”

Dr. Roth picked up his phone and dialed upstairs. After a few moments he handed the receiver to Gen. Steinman who muttered a ‘yes sir’ and gave the phone back to Dr. Roth. He threw a vicious glare at Dr. Roth and turned on his heel and left the infirmary.

Dr. Roth ushered Sierra back to the exam room where Paul was. He was awake and she rushed to his side and took his hand kissing it repeatedly. “Paul, I was so scared! You were lifeless.” She bent forward and kissed his lips, claiming them as her own.

He brought up one arm and cupped her cheek. His thumb smoothed away her tears off of her soft skin as he pushed her back a little. “Don’t cry. I’m alright.”

“I can’t help it. I thought I’d lost you, again!” All new tears flooded her eyes.

“I’m not that easy to kill,” he smiled. His fingertips traced along her cheek and down her neck. “Your skin is

soft as silk. I've thought that since the first day you and I practiced going under the house and my hands went under your shirt, accidentally, of course."

He was attempting to get her mind off of last night and she was grateful for it. She never wanted to be in that situation ever again.

"How are those ribs today, Paul?" Dr. Roth asked.

"They hurt, but my mind is taken off of the other pains in my body; funny how that works, isn't it?"

Sierra smiled, "I know exactly what you're talking about."

"Alright, you two, I believe we are ready to move forward. I'll make the phone call to make sure the other end is ready to go. Paul, you should pretend to be asleep, and Sierra, why don't you sit on this chair here and hold his hand with that doe-eyed look of concern you do so well. This way, if anyone comes into the clinic, like Reginald, we'll be prepared."

Sierra sat beside Paul and lovingly held his hand as they listened to Dr. Roth talk to someone on the phone. Dr. Roth used a lot of code words and descriptions which made it hard to decipher what he was saying exactly.

"How soon can your men be ready?" Dr. Roth's

eyebrows shot up quickly. “Well, then, it’s now or never. We go now.” He hung up the phone and looked at the two of them. “Follow me.”

Quite a pair the two of them made. Sierra limped on her splinted leg while allowing Paul to lean on her for support. Paul could barely walk from lack of strength, barely breath from broken ribs and needed to cough but knew better than to. They followed Dr. Roth into a supply closet just off the main exam room. A false wall had been built at the back of the closet creating a secret room three feet by four feet on the other side. They entered the small cubicle and Dr. Roth explained further, “You both are going to need to sit in the area behind this wall for several hours, if not days, until the rest of this plan transpires. Can you handle it?”

They looked at each other and smiled.

“But you’ve got to be quiet, no noises, coughing, sneezing, or laughing. The door will always be open and the light on so any sounds in this room will be heard by all.”

They both nodded.

“There’s food and water up on that shelf and this here is a port-a-potty. I hope neither of you are shy. I don’t know how long it will take to complete this leg of the plan and once you are closed in here, I can’t talk to you without

risking giving away your location.”

“Alright,” Paul said.

“If you need to communicate with me, use this code guide. The basic necessities are in there with a drug name listed as the code name. Write your drug name on one of these pink slips and slide it under the wall right here. Penicillin means you need water. Insulin means you need food and so on. I’ll keep my eye open for pink slips. Make sure you stand and stretch regularly to keep adequate blood flow in your legs.”

“What happens next?” Sierra asked him.

“I figure I have about thirty seconds to execute the next step.”

Dr. Roth took some supplies down from the shelf in the closet. He smeared some thick putty substance over his temple and then took a bag of blood and squirted it on his head and down his lab coat. “Don’t worry, it’s my own blood. Time to start this charade. You two have officially fled the palace. Step in and pull the wall shut.”

Dr. Roth placed some blood on his hands and haphazardly stumbled around the exam room a bit, touching this and that. He squirted a splotch on the floor and deposited the blood bag in the bio-hazard waste container. He pulled the phone to his blood spot and dialed

the upstairs number.

“Help,” he gasped, “infirmary, escaped.” Dr. Roth dropped the receiver on the floor and laid his head in the puddle of blood and waited.

Behind the false wall in the supply closet, Paul held Sierra close to his body in anticipation of the shake down.

“What if they find us?” she whispered.

“They won’t. Dr. Roth is very smart and he knows what will look suspicious and what won’t. An open closet with the light on isn’t suspicious. They’ll be searching the palace and the grounds.”

Dr. Roth’s voice sounded into the closet, “Silence, they’re coming.”

Paul and Sierra looked at each other, both shocked that even their whisperings could be heard. The door to the infirmary slammed open and frantic voices filled the room, chaotic and frustrated because they couldn’t awaken Dr. Roth.

“What the hell happened in here?” Reginald’s voice thundered. “Doctor, wake up, damn you. Search the palace! Alert the guards to be on the lookout for a man and a woman. Shut down the border, ground all flights. No one in, no one out; that girl is as slippery as a greased pig.”

“Dr. Roth, what happened?” Victor’s voice ordered.

“One of them hit me after I turned my back to put up the x-rays. I turned to see them running out the door, well not exactly running, he has broken ribs and her ankle is still painful. They couldn’t have gone far. When you find them, bring them to me. I have a score to settle.”

“Get in line.” Victor’s harsh voice gave Sierra shivers as Paul held her.

“Get yourself cleaned up, Dr. Roth,” Reginald almost sounded as if he cared. “We need a description of them. What was Sierra wearing this morning Victor?”

“Uh, um I don’t...I think pants...a shirt?”

“You’re an idiot, Victor.”

“Well, she wasn’t wearing a dress, that’s what I mean. Oh! I remember, she had on a pink top and cream slacks. I remember thinking how ugly the pants were.”

“Good. Dr. Roth, what was he wearing?”

“Just the usual prison suit.”

“There, we have a description. Get it out to the police and the border,” Reginald ordered.



The exam room quieted down as most of the voices left the room. “Dr. Roth, may I assist you with your injury?” an unrecognizable voice sounded into the closet.

Paul and Sierra both tensed. What if it was discovered his injury was really putty?

Dr. Roth didn't panic though, “Yes. Scoot that cart over to me please. Thank you. In the cupboard to the left is a suture tray. It's labeled as such.”

Sierra and Paul listened to the variety of noises coming from the exam room. Small talk between the doctor and his assistant continued for about twenty minutes. At one point, Dr. Roth instructed the assistant to get some supplies out of the closet—the very closet they were hiding in. They could hear him rifling through containers just on the other side of the wall, not knowing the fugitives were inches away.

Another breathless voice sounded in from the other room, “They've been spotted! They stole your car, Dr. Roth.”

“Are you serious? They must have taken my keys out of my jacket. That's just great! I just paid off the loan! So, where did they spot them?”

“They made it out of the city and are headed north.

They're stupid if they think they'll get past the border. Every policeman, military troop, undercover cop and drug sniffing dog is looking for them. They won't get far."

"It would appear they've gotten far enough without being seen," Dr. Roth answered back.

Voices on a hand held radio reported in distorted voices, "Suspect's vehicle crashed."

"What location?"

"Three mile hill. They went over the edge."

"Edge of what."

"What do you think? The cliff. We're going to need... going to need, ah hell, there's no way they survived that." A loud distortion of sound blared through the radio.

Dr. Roth asked, "What was that?"

The other voice answered, "It sounded like a,"

The radio's voice was near indiscernible, "The car exploded! It's in flames, we need a fire truck." There were a lot of background voices behind the voice. "Cancel that, we need a helicopter. We're just going to have to wait for the fire to burn itself out."

“How far down is the vehicle?”

“At least five hundred feet,” the radio banter continued.

The three men in the infirmary talked together. Dr. Roth said, “Reginald is not going to like this one bit.”

“Tell me about it. I don’t want to even cross his path for fear he’ll shoot me just to feel better.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wouldn’t matter.”

“How’s Victor going to take this?” Dr. Roth asked.

“Victor couldn’t care less, I’m guessing. He’s been seen with the daughter of General Steinman ever since Sierra disappeared a few days ago.”

“Elinore Steinman?”

“Yes.”

“Victor is a piece of work, really,” the third voice stated.

“He’s Reginald’s piece of work and we all have to live with it,” Dr. Roth said plainly. “You two better get back to your posts before Reginald sees you’re gone or I’ll be treating you later.”

“Um, we realize we don’t really have to ask, but can you keep what we just said, you know, confidential?”

“Of course.”

The two men left the room and silence settled in.

There was no verbal communication between the doctor and his escapees throughout the morning. Paul sat on the small chair and Sierra on the floor, but only after she insisted on it because of his ribs. They kept their whispering to an absolute minimum. Paul and Sierra ate minimal food and drank some water. The less in their systems the less they’d need to use the bathroom.

Paul struggled several times with his insatiable urge to cough. He knew it would hurt like hell, not to mention it could give away their location. He sipped water and cleared his throat as quietly as he could.

Throughout the day, various palace staff members came into the infirmary with a wide assortment of ailments. Everyone voiced their concern for Dr. Roth’s well being and had their own comments about the situation between Sierra Montgomery and her mysterious friend. Most of the palace employees felt Sierra was right in trying to flee. But with every admission to Dr. Roth, a plea for him to keep it quiet followed.

That evening the word came in the bodies of the two

escapees were being brought to the palace for identification. Paul and Sierra listened to the one sided phone conversation of Dr. Roth's.

"Burned beyond recognition? Then what makes you think it's them?" Long silence, "Well, only if I had dental records or some other form of medical... wait, I performed x-rays on him. I could make an identification based on those. I have her dental records on file."

A voice from the exam room said, "Well, ole Reginald's knickers are sure in a twist over this one. Not only did these two get past him, his guards and his police, now he's lost Sierra Montgomery for good. She was to be the force to bring him stability in power."

"I've never quite understood that."

"What part, the fact the Montgomery's held the power before Reginald's father, or the fact that having Sierra in the palace would calm the people?"

"I thought King Louis held the power and he was only married to a Montgomery."

"The Montgomery's held the power in this country for several decades leading up to the overthrow of the king. The king was just their puppet."

"Don't you think the citizens of Rendier would suspect

Sierra was being abused or controlled? I would think it would cause more uprisings than calming. Did Sierra even understand the whole family line issue?"

"I don't know. You know, doc, I'm shocked you aren't up to speed on this subject."

"You forget, I'm from Baylend. That and I'm locked down here next to the dungeon. I don't get out much."

The two men laughed.

The door to the infirmary opened and a quick shuffling of feet could be heard. "General Steinman, sir," the unknown voice said.

"At ease, soldier, dismissed," Gen. Steinman ordered. The door opened and closed. "Doctor, I need you to take a look at something."

Paul's throat began having another spasm. Sierra placed her hand on his knee in concern as he swallowed repeatedly in an effort to prevent the cough.

"Have a seat," the crunching sound of exam bed paper was heard as the General sat.

"How long have you had that?" Dr. Roth asked his patient.

Sierra handed Paul his water to help him fight off the urge to cough.

“A couple of days now,” Gen. Steinman reported.

“What happened?”

“My daughter stabbed...it doesn't matter. It's getting worse and the swelling is climbing.”

“You've got yourself a nasty case of cellulitis. I'm going to give you an injection of antibiotics and some pills, but you'll need to let me check that out tomorrow to make sure it's getting better.”

Dr. Roth's voice sounded closer as he entered the closet for supplies.

Paul coughed. He knew it was the best time to let it out because Dr. Roth could say it was him, which is exactly what happened.

“Dr. Roth, are you alright?”

“Yes, I've been fighting off a cold for a while now.” Dr. Roth had left the closet and was back in with his patient. “There you go, that's a powerful antibiotic and you should see major improvement within twenty-four,”

Paul coughed again and everything went silent for five

seconds, then the quick rustling of paper as the General bolted off the exam bed, and then the ominous sound of a gun being cocked.

“Don’t move, Dr. Roth, or I’ll shoot!”

Sierra and Paul embraced each other in absolute fear. Ashamed of his weaknesses, Paul’s eye’s watered. The plan had failed; he’d failed Sierra once again.

“What an elaborate plan you’ve concocted, Doctor. Reginald will be pleased to learn the Montgomery girl lives, but it will madden him to no end to learn his trusted physician is a traitor. I should kill you now and save him the trouble, and I should kill the girl too and save the insurgents the trouble. No, I’ll call up to Reginald. Don’t move!”

Dr. Roth’s knees trembled and his fingers had gone numb with fear. It had been a good plan, a solid plan; if only he’d sound proofed the cubicle. His eyes darted around the room looking for some type of a weapon. But with a gun barrel staring him down, and an excellent target master behind the trigger, he didn’t dare move. The General picked up the phone and began punching in the four digit number for Reginald; first number, second, third button pressed...he stopped and hung up the phone.

“Dr. Roth, I hope you realize how lucky you are that Clive likes you.” He un-cocked his gun and put it back in its



holster. "I do see his point though; you will be instrumental when the time comes."

"You and Clive?"

"Yes. But don't think for a second I wouldn't kill the girl if she is captured."

"She won't be captured."

"She would've been right now if I was anyone else."

Dr. Roth rubbed his hands roughly over his face and sat on the exam bed with a crunch. "General, don't forget the pills."

"Right, thank you."

"Same."

The door to the infirmary opened and closed. Dr. Roth entered the closet. "Cough it out, son, we're alone."

"I'm sorry," Paul said humbly.

Sierra added, "Gen. Steinman is an insurgent? Who would've thought that?"

Late in the night, Paul and Sierra were awakened to the lights being turned on and voices filling the room.

Reginald, Victor and Dr. Roth's were easy to pick out. The others must have been guards.

"Place them here." Dr. Roth ordered. Dull thuds and chair legs scraped the floor followed by the sound of zippers being opened filtered into the supply closet.

"Eww, disgusting, that better be the S-O-B." Victor's voice was muffled as if maybe his hand was over his mouth and nose.

"How long will it take you to make the identification, Dr. Roth?" Reginald asked.

"A couple of hours for a positive ID. I wouldn't stop searching if I were you. This could be a ruse to throw you off their tracks."

"I doubt it. They're not that clever. Besides, that one has a metal splint just like Sierra's."

Victor's voice sounded somber, "Look at the wedding ring. That's the one I gave her."

Reginald followed up with, "Do you need any assistance?"

"No, but I would like uninterrupted time. Any medical emergencies will need to go to the hospital, not down here."

“Understood. Let’s go Victor.”

“I would like to have a moment alone,” Victor said almost remorsefully. “She was... my wife.”

“Of course, we’ll step out,” Dr. Roth said.

Paul and Sierra held very still in the closet. His arms wrapped around her for comfort.

Victor’s footsteps were heard as he walked around the exam room. The eerie sound of his voice made Sierra’s hair stand on end. “I know you can hear me, Sierra.”

Sierra started shaking with fear. Paul held her tighter.

“There’s no way you’d do this to me and not be here to gloat. All I can say is I’m happy you’re dead. At least Riley can’t have you now.” The door to the exam room opened and then closed.

“Who’s Riley?” Paul asked as he let out large exhale.

“Someone I went to school with. I thought for a second he knew we were in the room.”

“Me too, that was intense.”

Dr. Roth came back in and actually whistled while he worked. They heard him breaking bone and wheeling

gurneys into the x-ray room. Later they heard the shuffling of files in the filing cabinet. Occasionally Dr. Roth would mutter something like, “perfect” or “beautiful”. After what seemed to be an eternity, they listened as he made the phone call informing Reginald he’d completed the identification.

A short while later, Reginald and Victor entered the exam room for the verdict.

“In my medical opinion and based on the evidence, I declare these two corpses are in fact Paul Bronson and Sierra Montgomery Rawlings.”

“You’re one hundred percent positive?” Victor asked.

“Absolutely, do you want to look over my report?”

“No, it’s not necessary.”

“Really, it’s quite fascinating the matching,”

“I said no, Dr. Roth,” Victor cut him off with a tone of disgust.

“Suit yourself. I have a recommendation to make, if I may, sir.”

Reginald answered in a much deflated voice, “Go ahead.”

“The body of the male should be returned to Baylend to keep the tension at a minimum between the two countries, and a formal funeral service should be held for Sierra to help propagate your willingness to bring her into your family.”

“Fine, see that the body is shipped back.”

“If I may, sir, I would very much like to visit my family in Baylend. I could take his remains for you and offer condolences on your behalf, if you’d grant me permission to cross the border.”

“Fine, I’ll give you three days leave.”

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Reginald sat in his high back leather chair in his office, sipping his whiskey from the glass and staring off into space. Where did it all go wrong? Exactly when had he lost? At least the Montgomery girl had been officially married to Victor and the press conference had taken place. He’d have to use another excuse to explain her death. *‘The damned insurgents succeeded this time in killing the last Montgomery.’* Yes, the public would buy that. They are all idiots and believe what’s placed before them. But still, all those years of careful planning and plotting to have Victor marry royalty were for not. It had been so close. Why was that girl so obstinate? Couldn’t she see the

importance of the overall plan? If only he'd beaten her more, maybe it would have sunk in better.

## Chapter 13

Being stuffed inside a body bag together wasn't so bad, Paul thought to himself as he pulled Sierra even closer to him; kind of like being in the same sleeping bag. The disturbing thought was the bag next to them held a *real* dead person. Dr. Roth had placed an oxygen tank inside with them for better air quality before they left the palace. The body bag didn't allow adequate air flow being that they were designed to carry bodies not needing to breathe. The pair of them would be zipped shut for a good hour until they crossed the border and reached a safe area.

Paul's ribs hurt, but his heart overflowed with joy and canceled out his pain. Sierra kept asking him if he was comfortable, worrying about his injuries. They were escaping, actually pulling it off and pain wasn't even on his mind. Perhaps this was the same type of feeling Sierra had felt when she arrived at their home, her joy overriding her pain.

"I can't believe this worked," Sierra spoke softly in Paul's ear. She tried not to press on his chest too much. But knowing they were mere minutes away from being totally free had her feeling so giddy and excited.

“It’s not finished yet.”

“I know, but still. Dr. Roth has earned our respect and allegiance forever.”

“That he has. So, you were married to Victor?”

“Yes,” she paused, “he consummated the marriage.”

Paul rubbed her back as much as he could in the limited confines of the bag. “It was a good thing we didn’t do anything at the cabin or else you’d have suffered at the palace.”

“No, *you* would have, Paul. What if I become pregnant because of Victor?”

“Then we’ll deal with it. I already plan on running away with you ASAP, and if you are pregnant, I’ll marry you to make it look like it was mine. No one will ever need to know. Certainly not the child, if in fact there is one.”

“You’d marry me so I didn’t have an illegitimate child?”

“No, I’ll marry you because I love you and I need you in my life. I want to marry you.”

“I love you too, Paul. But I do expect a proper proposal before I say yes.”

“How much more romantic does it get than what we have right now?”

“You mean the part where we are lying next to your dead body? You’re a smart guy, you’ll figure it out.” She scooted up and kissed his cheek and as she scooted back down he kissed the top of her head.

The vehicle slowed down to a stop. “We must be at the border. Hold very still,” Paul whispered.

They heard muffled voices and then the back doors opened up. Dr. Roth spoke to someone, “Do you need to see the bodies?”

“Why are there two body bags, sir? I was told you’d be transporting one.”

“One body is a palace employee, Michael Grossman, who died recently. His family lives in Slaterville and requested his body be brought to them for burial. Reginald told me to take them both to Slaterville. It was a last minute decision, but feel free to call him for verification, if you like. I’m in no rush.” Dr. Roth’s voice held a nonchalant tone.

Paul and Sierra heard the distinctive sound of grating metal as the zipper on the other body bag was being pulled open. Dr. Roth said, “Have you ever seen a charred body, soldier? It’s definitely something you’ll never forget.”



“Whoa! You’re right. What a way to die.”

“Did you know Mr. Grossman?”

Sierra noticed the bag material lift above their faces as the zipper was grasped. The tension of the moment weighed heavy on Sierra. They were so close to escaping, so close to have everything go wrong. Sierra could tell Paul felt the incredible strain of the moment too. Neither one of them dared breathe, but they couldn’t keep their breaths hushed for long. A third voice joined the conversation, “Sir, Reginald Rawlings just phoned and informed that Dr. Roth would be transporting two bodies on his approval, codeword alpha.”

“Alright then, on your way doctor.” The bag settled slowly onto Paul’s head.

“Thank you.”

The door to the van closed and they started moving again.

They both exhaled, letting out all of the tension from the moment. Sierra moved her lips up Paul’s neck until she found his mouth. She kissed him gently, and slid back down and carefully rested her head on his chest.

“Reginald didn’t know Dr. Roth was transporting two bags,” Sierra said.

“I know. I don’t understand it either.”

Thirty minutes later Dr. Roth pulled over and opened the back of the van. “Alright, kids, you can come out now.” He unzipped the bag and helped Sierra out. “How’s the leg, Sierra?”

“Dr. Roth, I would like to be called Sara from now on. Sierra Montgomery is dead. Paul and his family all call me by Sara.”

“Well that explains a lot. All this time I thought Paul was pronouncing your name wrong, but he was calling you Sara.”

“My leg is fine. Paul’s ribs on the other hand are probably hurting him.”

It was true. Paul couldn’t sit up straight by himself. Dr. Roth helped him and then pulled out a couple of pain pills for him to take. “We are going to stop in Slaterville to drop off the pseudo Paul, after that we’ll drive to Northtown. I’ve made arrangements for your parents to meet us at my folk’s home.”

“My parents are alright then?” Paul felt excitement filling his soul.

“As far as I could tell.”

Sierra asked, “Dr. Roth, what happened back at the border? How did we get past?”

“Apparently one of the border patrollers is an insurgent and knew exactly what to say to his superior. We can all be thankful for that because we were mere millimeters away from being discovered. I think I’ve aged ten years since you came into my life, Paul.”

Sierra and Paul climbed back in the van and sat on the floor. Dr. Roth got behind the wheel and pulled back on the road; the road to freedom.

Dr. Roth turned the van into the driveway of his childhood home. “I wasn’t lying when I asked Reginald for some personal time with my family.” Dr. Roth opened the side door and helped Paul and Sierra out of the van.

Paul watched as his mother and father came running out of the house with ear to ear smiles.

“Oh Paul, I’m so happy you’re alive!” His mother grabbed his head and plastered kisses in his hair.

Sierra watched the tender action from mother to son and her eyes watered up. She wouldn’t ever have that, ever again, because of the ruthless Rawlings’ family. Her determination solidified even further to defy the dictator.

Zachary came over to Sierra and gave her a huge hug, “Welcome to the family, Sara.”

Elsie tried to hug Paul but he fought her off. Dr. Roth came to his rescue, “He has broken ribs and a very sore back, Mrs. Bronson.”

“Doctor, we owe you everything,” Elsie said and hugged him tightly. “Thank you for this. Thank you for bringing back my boy.”

Dr. Roth issued a heart felt ‘you’re welcome’.

Martha came out of the house along with Dr. Roth’s parents. “Get your hind ends inside before someone sees you!” She had a large smile on her face and gave Paul and Sierra a kiss on each cheek as they walked past her.

Paul turned and found Dr. Roth speaking to Martha. “You must be Martha Bronson.”

“That I am, young man.”

“A certain individual from the insurgents doesn’t like you very much.”

Martha chuckled, “That would be Clive, I’m guessing.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why the hard feelings?”

“Clive has a way of using people for his own gain. He lost his direction many years ago and I tried to point it out to him. He made a vital mistake and his wife was executed by Reginald, and he blamed me. It’s a typical reaction for any man who uses people; blame someone else when a plan goes awry. I’m shocked he helped you at all.”

“He hoped I’d join his team once I got back to Rendier. In the end, I’m no better than him, I guess. I used him for *my* own gain, and that of Sierra--I mean Sara and Paul. Once Clive realizes I’m not coming back, he’ll blow a gasket,” John chuckled.

“Understandably so.”

“He expressed a great deal of dislike for the Montgomery family and promised if Sara was captured she’d be killed.”

“The Montgomery name is the most powerful in all of Rendier and Clive knows it. I don’t doubt for a second he’d have her killed, in fact, he’s already tried repeatedly. In my opinion, Clive is striving for the throne. He’s placing his people one at a time in the palace so when the timing is right, he can stage a successful coup. If a Montgomery is roaming around the palace, his coup will fail because even his own followers regard the ousted monarchy as being better than him.”

“That makes sense and explains more than you know. The question is would Rendier be in any better hands if he took over?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Martha, your connections in Rendier are invaluable.”

“Not nearly as valuable as the girl my grandson will probably marry. My levels of connections are now as good as it gets, for only Ms. Montgomery can bring down the Rawlings’s rule successfully.”

Sam arrived shortly after they did and it took most of the evening to get caught up on everything that had happened since the raid.

Zachary had been successful with turning the guards’ allegiance away from Reginald, but wasn’t quick enough to reach Paul at the cabin to warn him. They all agreed it wouldn’t have mattered. There really wasn’t anywhere they could have run to, and that line of conversation meandered to ways the cabin could be a better hide-out.

Another general consensus was the Bidell’s got what they deserved. Greg had been warned by Zachary the Rawlings’ wouldn’t have any use for him and it ended up being truer than even he thought it would be. The news announced Greg’s death as a mugging incident, and his parents as simply disappeared without a trace. Maybe they

fled, maybe they were taken, no one knew, and no one was even looking further into it.

Sam had made the decision to flee in the night with his crossers. Even though it went against what he'd been instructed to do, it saved his life and all six defectors. He drove north to a secure location and waited for things to cool down before surfacing.

Paul told about how they stayed in the tunnel for the whole day and then moved to the cabin after dark. When Zachary heard how much trouble the get away car gave them, his head fell. Paul reassured him that everything worked out in the end. Paul went on to tell them about Sierra falling in the creek and her narrow escape of death.

He told everyone about the happenings at the palace but glazed over the abuse and the fact that Victor slept with Sierra. Paul lied further by saying Sierra and Victor had only been married a matter of hours when their deaths were convincingly faked, thanks to Dr. Roth.

Paul looked at him with hope in his eyes Dr. Roth would follow his lead and not expose the uglier details of the palace. He didn't.

"Sara," Elsie asked, "what do you plan to do with your new life?"

Sierra turned to Paul, "Whatever I do, it will be with

Paul.”

Paul’s face reddened as all eyes moved to him. “Well, eventually, we will house crossers if the need still calls for it. For now, we’d better drop off the map entirely.”

Martha spoke up, “I couldn’t agree more. It’s likely the Bidell’s weren’t the only spies living in Slaterville. That’s why I’ve already made plans to take the two of you north to Densfield.”

Late in the night, they said goodbyes and Grandma Martha drove Paul and Sierra to Densfield. Zachary, Elsie and Sam would be returning to Slaterville to act the part of mourning Paul. They would go through the motions of a funeral and make statements to the press to validate their stories. The fake body of Paul Bronson would have a proper burial just in case Reginald or Victor decided to venture to Slaterville.

After sixteen hours of driving, Paul, Sierra and Martha arrived in Densfield. They found a small hotel room and relaxed as much as they could. Paul and Sierra sat on the bed with pillows propped behind Paul to support his ribs and Sierra cuddled next to him, laying her head on his shoulder. Martha sat at the table talking on the phone making living arrangements for them. On the television, a news report told of the funeral for Sierra Montgomery Rawlings.



They watched as the reporter announced that the threat to Sierra's life, sadly, was real. The public wedding had been called off due to threats and the marriage had taken place in private. It was unclear how the assassination went down, but officials quickly apprehended the suspect and executed him on the spot.

A picture of Sierra with her birth and death date flashed on the screen. It was the shot from the press conference when she looked back over her shoulder.

Paul kissed the top of her head and she looked up at him.

"I'm really dead. We're going to need to change our names."

"Just our last," Paul replied.

Martha put her hand over the phone, "Make it Cutler. Cutler is my maiden name."

Sierra tried out the sound of it, "Paul and Sara Cutler. I love it. I love you, Paul." She smiled, looked up and kissed Paul.

"I love you, Sara Cutler, with all my heart. Will you marry me?" He ran his fingers down the side of her face.

"Yes."

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Riley Stone stood away from the group of mourners at the cemetery. Snow flakes fell reverently, almost symbolically. The silence of the surrounding area seemed to punctuate the profoundness of the moment. Some pastor murmured a prayer, or rite of passage for her soul or something like that; Riley didn't care. All he knew was what he felt. He felt empty, stripped of all will to live, tromped on by people more powerful than him, once again.

How did this come to be? How could he have let this happen? Why was he powerless to prevent it? Sierra was gone forever now. Gone! This was all Clive B. Roberts's fault. He'd pressed Riley to befriend Victor, pushed him because there was no other in the underground of the same age except for Elinore Steinman. Apparently, she'd been pushed to the forefront now as she was sitting between Victor and her own father, Gen. Steinman.

Clive's tutoring in how to associate with and act like Victor had paid off somewhat. Victor had accepted him as a friend, peculiar as their relationship might be. Victor still accepted him. Riley could see Victor's powerful future and he wanted to be part of it.

Clive taught Riley how to win with the girls. Victor could certainly have any girl he wanted and if Riley was to be his

friend, then he would need to be able to do the same. Riley's outer appearance had been tended to courtesy of Clive. The best stylists, top personal trainers and dieticians all helped him transform into an undeniably handsome man during his teen years. He could have any girl he wanted, and he'd had plenty. But the one girl he wanted most could see through his shallowness. She was the only one who mattered to him; her opinion meant everything. It hurt to know he'd been rejected because of his association with Clive. Now, she lay in the casket before him.

Clive had warned him not to associate with Sierra Montgomery. He'd said she was off limits, but that made him want her more. Clive told him any focus on Sierra would bring about Victor's attentions; that was true. That, Riley truly regretted. But Riley had been torn between love and power; he thought he could have both. He could rise in power beside Victor with Sierra by his side. Only the further things progressed, Riley realized Sierra would be by Victor's side, not his.

Why wouldn't she listen to him? Why did she hate him so? He'd truly meant it when he told her he could hide her and reinvent her. But she looked at him with that disgusted look in her eye and it hurt. That look was the last one he'd gotten from her before finding out the devastating news; she'd never look upon him again.

What he wouldn't do to see her eyes again even if they

held loathing for him, at least she'd be alive and he could continue to try to win her over. Riley blinked back the tears that formed in his eyes. He looked at Elinore Steinman's profile and a wave of hatred filled his entire being. She represented Clive. She would now be the star puppet in the show. Her strings would be controlled by Clive and it made Riley sick to think about it.

Why should Clive be allowed to have so much power? Who did he think he was? The only consolation in Riley's mind was that he knew Victor's weaknesses and Clive did not. He applauded himself for not revealing these to Clive.

At that very moment the sun shown through a break in the clouds illuminating the snowflakes as if they'd become energized with electricity. Riley's mind cleared and his revenge began to take form. This literal light hitting his mind started in motion his plan to rise above all who had taken everything from him. Riley vowed right there, at that moment, even as the gentle snow flakes lightly touched Sierra's coffin, he would avenge her death. He would rise above Clive B. Roberts. He would rise above Victor. Somehow, someday, someday, he'd prevail.

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## **About the Author**

Lorena Angell lives in Southeast Idaho with her

supportive husband, three children and several well-loved pets including poly-dactyl cats, Oreo and Leroy Jenkins, and two Labradors, Milo and Zoe.

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