

# HARLEY AUSTIN

The book cover features a man and a woman standing in a dark, atmospheric setting. The woman, on the left, has long, dark hair with reddish-orange highlights and is wearing a black, form-fitting crop top and black pants. She has a small tattoo on her left hip. The man, on the right, is shirtless, showing a muscular physique, and is wearing dark jeans. He has a small tattoo on his left chest. They are both looking directly at the camera. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a cityscape visible in the distance, including a tall, white tower. The ground is covered in dark, wet-looking material, and there are small, glowing yellow particles floating around them. The overall mood is mysterious and intense.

BOOK ONE

# AWAKENED

A W A K E N E D   S E R I E S



A BOOK SERIES 7 YEARS IN THE WRITING,  
SEE WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT  
HARLEY AUSTIN'S

# AWAKENED

*"Austin has a way of weaving together a fantastic story that is beyond believable."*

— M. Hampton, San Francisco, CA

*"Harley Austin is a skilled and vibrant storyteller! The rapid pace and unexpected twists continue until the end. Powerfully unforgettable!"*

— C. Cunningham, Seattle, WA

*"Sizzling romance. Politics. Assassins. Mystery. Intrigue. The pages practically turn themselves. I couldn't put it down. I want to see the movies!"*

— A. J. Andrews, New York, NY

*"Finally! A romance that any guy would want to read."*

— K. Randall, Plano, TX

# HARLEY AUSTIN'S

## AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK ONE  
AWAKENED

BOOK SEVEN  
DECEPTION

BOOK TWO  
DOMINION

BOOK EIGHT  
VALOR

BOOK THREE  
LEGACY

BOOK NINE  
PROMETHEAN

BOOK FOUR  
INVICTUS

BOOK TEN  
NOVUS

BOOK FIVE  
INTERRA

BOOK ELEVEN  
MERIDIAN

BOOK SIX  
PARADISUS

BOOK TWELVE  
ASCENSION

AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK ONE

# AWAKENED

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

[HARLEYAUSTIN.COM](http://HARLEYAUSTIN.COM)

AWAKENED—Copyright © 2009-2017 Harley Austin. All rights reserved.

Published by Harley Austin Publishing | [HarleyAustin.com](http://HarleyAustin.com)

Amazon ISBN Paperback: 978-1-4973-1941-7

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyright materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Version 2.0—RELEASE EDITION. This work may be periodically updated by the author/publisher with various corrections, additions and/or deletions to the work without a change of ISBN and without notice, guarantee or warranty of any kind.

*For my beautiful angel;  
the love of my life and the very best friend  
anyone could ever hope to have.*





AWAKENED



# PROLOGUE

Qumran, 1947

**T**his is bloody insane," Alastair mumbled under his breath, the sound of automatic gunfire in the not so far off distance. He pulled his foul-smelling, draping Arab disguise more tightly around his head as he followed his armed Bedouin guides under a bright moonlit night around the shores of the Dead Sea.

The small cadre of dirty men made their way up a short canyon and then ascended some steep rocky terrain along the side of the cliff. When they could climb no further, a rope ladder appeared, suddenly unfurling down the side of the steep sandstone.

Alastair shakily climbed the short forty feet to a small, kerosene lantern lit cave where only a couple of Bedouin guards with rifles and two colleagues now stood huddled over a rickety table scattered with disorganized piles of very old

scrolls and tall clay pots beneath it. He pulled back his disguise and dumped the malodorous robes onto a rickety wooden chair next to the entrance.

"I do hope," Alastair began, his British accent thick with the culture and arrogance of his people, "that the both of you didn't bring me out into the middle of this Godforsaken hellhole in the middle of the night to look at more of these—worthless scraps?"

"They're not worthless, Alastair," Monique shot back. "And if you had a brain in your head you be able to see that."

She wasn't backing down. His ruse about the scrolls' value being worthless would be in vain if she'd already found a buyer or someone else in the antiquities trade who knew their paleography half as well as he did.

Alastair frowned, and then nodded. "Alright, let me have a look. This better be worth getting shot at to get here."

"We found dozens of the ones you've already looked at, in another cave not far from here," Cantwell offered, hunched over the table beside Monique. "But then we came across this little grotto," his eyes darting up and around the cave they were now within. "At first, we thought it to be like the other one, harboring a handful of these clay pots and preserving scrolls like these," his eyes scanned the scrolls now laying atop the table.

Alastair nodded. The scrolls they'd uncovered had not only caught his own attention but were garnering the attention of some of his competition as well. It wouldn't be long before the authorities began nosing around, ruining any chance of the find being profitable.

"But as we explored further, we noticed that the wall toward the back here wasn't actually stone, but a kind of clay brick made to look like the surrounding stone."

"A hidden chamber?" Alastair asked.

"Exactly what we thought as well," Cantwell nodded.

“Interesting. Have you drilled to see what’s on the other side?”

Monique scoffed. “This isn’t some archeological dig, Alastair. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of demilitarized zone. This whole area is on the brink of civil war. There wasn’t time for protocol. We broke through it,” she leveled.

Not at all surprised, Alastair looked at the both of them, “And?”

“Maybe you should just see for yourself—” Monique finished.

The three of them moved to the back of the short cave where an obvious thick wall of stone-looking clay brick had been knocked aside. Alastair squeezed himself through the short opening and entered what lay beyond, followed by his two colleagues. Through the hole, a large chamber much bigger than the natural cave he’d just been in opened before him. Perhaps thirty feet in diameter, there was nothing natural about this hidden chamber. The sandstone had been neatly and smoothly carved away into the shape of dome. A pair of kerosene pressure lamps were already burning and well-lit the large room. Aside from the rubble of the broken entrance, the floor of the hidden chamber appeared unusually smooth, almost polished as if a single piece of stone. But it was the walls of the chamber that gave Alastair the most wonder upon entering.

“What the bloody—?” Intricately carved and smoothly finished bas relief images covered the walls from floor to apex depicting images of people and events he’d never seen before. “—what the bloody is this?” Alastair looked carefully at the walls of the domed room.

“You tell us,” Cantwell half cajoled. “You’re the bloody expert.”

"I've—I've never seen anything like this. My God," he marveled in intoxicating wonder as he moved his hands delicately over the slightly dusty stone, leaving behind a shining sculpture from beneath the dust.

"This—this is not Essene! It's not even Arab!" Alastair glanced in surprise at his schoolmate colleagues.

"Oh, quite." Cantwell nodded. He looked at Monique nodding his sarcastic approval. "He's quite good you know. Quite good."

Monique approached Alastair. "Robert and I had planned on keeping this grotto our little secret for a while. But when we uncovered this," she motioned to the intricate bas reliefs, "we seemed to have bitten off a bit more than either of us could chew."

"That's an understatement," Alastair agreed. "I've never seen anything like these; the style is—" Alastair fought for words, "completely unlike anything ever discovered in the region. Nothing even comes close, or as well preserved."

"The walls aren't the only thing in this room that's been *well preserved*, Alastair," Cantwell offered. "The truth is, we didn't bring you here to look at walls."

"Well, what then?"

Cantwell pointed to the center of the room. "Those."

Alastair had been so taken with the illumination of the sculptured walls that he'd completely missed seeing the dais at the center of the room. The smooth black stone was almost unnoticeable in the lantern light. The three of them approached and ascended the short circular stairs of the polished dais. Twelve stone scroll handles protruded from the middle of a four-foot tall altar that had the look and feel of polished granite.

Alastair looked at his colleagues and then carefully drew up one the scroll handles from the multi-ton stone base. He rested it on the inscription-covered table and carefully

unrolled what felt like papyrus but clearly wasn't. It felt almost new, in fact.

"What is this material? It's not velum, or papyrus. It feels almost like, cloth of some kind."

"We were hoping you could tell us," Monique nodded.

Alastair shook his head as he carefully unfurled the scroll, "I haven't the foggiest ... what, what is this?"

The young-looking professor glanced up at his colleagues in disbelief again and then back at the scroll. This—this isn't Hebrew, or Aramaic. It's, it's—Phoenician," the three of them said all at once, looking at Alastair.

"That's—that's—"

"Impossible?" Monique finished.

"Quite." Alastair agreed. "It's impossible, in fact."

"And yet, Alastair," Cantwell continued, "here we are; in a room of exquisite design; looking at Phoenician scrolls that haven't been seen in perhaps three to four thousand years."

Alastair glared at the both of them. "Do either of you actually realize what you've discovered here? I mean, the magnitude and value of this find is beyond—"

"We don't care what they're worth, Alastair," Cantwell began firmly, "Yes, they're beyond valuable. We want to know what they *say*."

Alastair frowned and began to study the ancient writing for long moments. "It's written like an apocalypse or future revelation, it reads like a prophecy of some kind." He continued to read the words. "Hmm, we're apparently in the middle of some epic revelation, I don't have any real context."

"Forget context, what kind of prophecy?" Monique asked.

Alastair frowned with a mocking glare. "You know, the two of you really should have studied more and fucked less."

Alastair's comment drew a wry smile from Cantwell. "Tell me you're not still smoldering about the three of us? That was years ago, old chap."

"Don't be so fuddy-duddy, Alastair," Monique scolded. "You should be glad we skipped studies. We wouldn't have needed you here otherwise to interpret for this rather momentous occasion."

"Humph," Alastair frowned. Even now in her forties, Monique could still command his attention as well as she did many years ago at the university.

"So what does it say?" Cantwell prodded.

Alastair read slowly the ancient words processing the thoughts as best he could with what he knew of the ancient Canaanite dialect. He read then re-read the words out loud:

FOR A TIME THE SONS OF GOD SHALL REST WITH THE  
DAUGHTERS OF MEN AND NONE SHALL REMAIN WHO  
WALK THE FACE OF THE EARTH

Both Cantwell and Monique stood motionless hanging on every word Alastair uttered from the ancient writing.

"The sons of God resting with the daughters of men? That almost sounds like Tanakh, or Torah," Cantwell assured.

Alastair nodded. "The sons of God were assumed to be great heroes in ancient times. Some claimed them to be children of the gods."

"Like Hercules?" Monique questioned.

"More like Sampson," Alastair corrected.

"Well, keep going, what else does it say?" Cantwell continued to prod.

Alastair continued to skim the words:

EVEN AS THE EVIL ONES DIMINISH, SO THEN SHALL THEY  
ALSO INCREASE IN POWER TO SPREAD THEIR WRATH  
THROUGH THE NATIONS



He continued to skim until the last paragraph of the end of the section he'd been reading.

AND FROM THE BLOOD OF THE DARK ONE SHALL RISE  
THE REBORN AND HE SHALL BRING FORTH FROM THE  
MIDST OF MEN THE AWAKENED OF GOD

"The 'reborn'? 'Awakened of God'? Alastair, these are not Christian or even Mithraic," Cantwell scowled. "Are you sure you're reading that properly?" His tone a bit incredulous.

"Stop it," Monique scolded. "No one reads or translates better than our Alastair Bond." She smiled at him.

"Indeed," Cantwell agreed still sporting a frown, and then a nod. He canned his sarcasm. "So what *are* these scrolls then, Alastair? What do they mean? What are they all *about*?"

"Don't you know already, Cantwell?" Alastair looked annoyed at his colleague. "That answer's been right in front of you this whole time."

Alastair pushed aside the cloth-like scroll to reveal the inscription that had been inlaid within the top of the polished altar. "Someone has gone to an awful lot of trouble and expense to protect and preserve ..." Alastair read the words aloud—

"THE BOOKS OF GOD"

"Which god?" Monique raised her brow.

"Difficult to say. The word is akin to *Adonis*, a proper noun of the period. It was the precursor to Ba'al in the Mesopotamian region, specifically the Sumerian I think, and Ra in Egypt, then what splintered into Hebrew El or Elohiym in Hebrew, and eventually Solis in the Roman era."

"Sun gods?"

"Imprecisely, Cantwell, but yes."

"Ba'al and Ra? Became Yahweh?" Monique raised her brow.

"Not exactly, but each culture assigned their own meanings and titles to the names inherited from the previous cultures."

"Who or what are these 'reborn' as you say?" Cantwell continued. "Mithras? He was supposed to have been 'reborn' after they sacrificed him. But that was a Persian deity if I am not mistaken."

"There were a number of resurrected gods of this era. Why are the two of you so intrigued by this? It's nothing more than ancient myth."

"Is it?" Monique raised her brow again.

Alastair scoffed.

"Look here, Bond," Cantwell interrupted, "someone went to a lot of bloody-hell trouble to create a chamber than is far beyond anything anyone has ever seen from a period that barely had the knowledge to stack rocks and plow a field. Not even the pyramids would be built for another two thousand years from the date of the language when these were written."

Alastair nodded.

Cantwell motioned his colleague's attention to the bas-relief wall of their chamber. "The detail of the carvings of this one section are intricately precise." He pointed to a carving sculpted near the top of the section of wall where a lantern burned, well lighting the area. "This sun radiating it rays, is repeated seven times within this dome."

"So?"

"So each one is a perfect copy of the others."

"Define perfect?" Alastair queried.

"All seven are exact duplicates, down to the millimeter. Not a single variation between any of them. They're perfect, as if carved mechanically somehow."

"Mechanically—" the seasoned archeologist scoffed.

"I don't know how else to explain it."

Alastair raised his brow to Monique. "And what do you think?"

"Honestly? *Something* carved this tomb, or whatever it is, *using* a means we cannot explain. It's utterly perfect, Alastair. Whoever these 'sons of god' or 'heroes' as you call them, were, they were doing things far beyond what anyone else was doing at the time. The sandstone of this room is perfectly polished."

He nodded his agreement. He couldn't argue with their findings, but what those findings ultimately meant after further study—could be anyone's guess at this point.

"We were hoping these scrolls would tell us more about the people who built this tomb."

Alastair turned his attention back to the scroll, laying it out further. He scanned its writings for long moments. Then mumbled to himself. "Hmmm."

"What does, 'hmmm' mean?" Cantwell watched his colleague's face carefully.

"This section tells of a goddess, reborn. Her name is *Elisheva*, 'God's Seventh', as near as I can make out."

"Seventh of what?"

"Goddesses would be my guess," Alastair offered, still scanning the cloth. "Ah, here we are—she is one of seven gods of destiny. Her power will know no equal," Alastair half mumbled reading the ancient words.

"Really?" Cantwell smirked. "Zeus isn't going to be happy about that."

Alastair continued his half mumbling. "It appears that she is awakened from a long sleep by another god called *Levi*."

"Oh good heavens, Alastair," Cantwell frowned. "Now you're testing us. Putting us on. Come off. We're not stupid."

"I'm not putting you on, Robert. I have better things to do than waste any of your time. These are the words."

"Alastair, 'Levi' doesn't appear in the Hebrew record for another thousand years," Monique charged. "That much we all know."

"Agreed. But this isn't a historical writing—it's an apocalypse; a revelation; a prophecy."

"Doesn't 'levi' just mean priest of some kind, ol chap?"

"Ordinarily, I would agree, Robert, but within this context, it is being used as a proper noun. Whoever wrote this knew of someone who would have this name—in the future. And it doesn't just mean 'priest', but someone with high knowledge."

"High knowledge—" Monique began. "Like someone with the knowledge to perhaps carve a room like the one we're standing in?"

"Indeed. Perhaps." Alastair agreed.

"Does it say *when*?" Cantwell asked. "Do we know when this Elisheva and Levi chap will appear?"

Alastair shook his head. "Only after the 'Dark One' appears, whoever that is, and these 'Seven Lords of evil' have taken over the world. It's all quite muddy at this point."

"We need to study these, Alastair." Monique began pulling other scrolls from their slots in the altar. "All of them."

"Where?"

"Not here."

"You'll never get them out of the region as large as they are. The authorities are already searching everyone."

"Don't argue with her, Alastair," Cantwell warned, also pulling more of the scrolls from their slots. "You know how she is when she makes up her mind."

"I'll get them back to London," she assured.

"And then what?" Alastair began rolling up the scroll he'd been reading.

"Then we start finding out who wrote these 'books of the gods'—and why."

# 1

**L**isa sat perched on an outcropped boulder next to the high-mountain trail waiting for her brother to answer a nature call. A minute later James emerged from the thick underbrush back onto the lightly worn path. She jumped from her boulder back onto the path as the two began their afternoon descent back to the campsite.

"I still think you need to let me submit your resume to HR, Lisa. I'm telling you, we're in a huge hiring frenzy at the moment. I know the director of marketing. He could get you into something really nice; a cushy office."

"I'm not becoming a corporate drone."

"I'm just sayin'," he offered, backtracking a bit.

"Listen, I really appreciate the offer, but I think I need to do this on my own. Mom and Dad helped out getting me into school; you helped out with the agency; I'm starting to feel like I can't do anything on my own."

"People help each other out, Lisa. It's what it's all about."

"I know; but—"

"But what? So someone helped you get into school and I helped you with a connection for the modeling agency. Nepotism only goes so far, it just gets you in the door, you did the rest."

She nodded. James was right. Her parents had good connections within the church and it had been those connections that had gotten her into one of the top religious universities in the country. She was grateful for the opportunity and she'd worked very hard to keep her GPA close to a four-point, even with her other jobs and activities.

"Are you going to take that gig with *Seattle Denim*?" he asked, stepping carefully down some makeshift trail steps. "It sounded like they really want you with all the messages they keep leaving you."

"Yes, I do. But the agency keeps getting in the way."

"You mean the rep wants more money."

"They keep saying I'm worth more, but it's already a lot of money. We don't live in New York. I'm fine with the offer."

"They probably want to push your bill rate higher so you can command more with the next client. That would be my guess anyway."

Both clomped down a steep part of the well-hewn trail.

"Did Dad tell you he got a call from the Conference?" James asked over his shoulder as she followed him down a narrow part of the trail.

"Yes, I was fuming when he told me about it. Honestly, that's part of the reason why I really want to do the local commercials now." Lisa began speaking in an overt tone of over-the-top high-brow sarcasm, "*'We're just concerned that your daughter's choice of vocation is unhealthy. We don't want to see her committing spiritual adultery.'* And what is that, exactly, 'spiritual adultery'?"

"It's whatever they want it to be," James assured.

"They act like they've never seen anyone wearing a swimsuit before."

"They're just not used to seeing someone from the church wearing one. Five bucks says that one or two, shall we say 'less attractive', ladies at church are behind this. They probably didn't like the way their husbands were looking at your clothes—or you," he grinned.

"James, they see people at waterparks and on beaches all the time. I'm not the first person to model a bikini. Other people model."

James looked at his sister with a grin, "Not like you do. I've told you this before, you are beyond hot in those things. The camera more than loves you."

"Still, I can't believe the church's busy-bodies want to insert themselves into my business. I don't work for them!"

"No, but Dad does. What did he say when you talked to him?"

Lisa smiled, "You know Daddy. What do you think he told me?"

James chuckled. "Knowing Dad, I'm sure he told you not to worry about the church and to follow your dreams."

Lisa nodded, "That's exactly what he said."

"See? Dad's right. Don't worry about it. They're just jealous because they're not getting paid to sit on a beach in Barbados surrounded by photographers. Which reminds me, you said they wanted you to go back?"

"They do, but not for another six months. That's the problem with this job, it's not exactly a constant paycheck. I only get paid when I work and the work isn't anything close to steady right now. I went to school so I could get a real job. Modeling is just kind of extra money. All it did was put me behind in my classes and help pay down my student loan—" Lisa ran into the back of James as he abruptly stopped in the

middle of the path. "Hey, what's—" Lisa suddenly froze with James as she looked down the trail at what had caused her brother to all but freeze in the middle of it.

Both of their eyes were now fixed on a very large brown bear that had wandered onto their path not far from where the two of them now stood.

"Oh, my God," Lisa whispered.

"Shhh," James silenced. But even his whisper was too loud. The big animal's attention was suddenly on the both of them and it grunted and snarled deeply as it began bounding up the path toward the two of them.

"RUN!" James pushed his sister back up the path running with her. He pulled a small buck knife from its belt clip and unfolded it while pushing Lisa ever faster up the trail.

The path rounded some trees and then forked. They couldn't see the bear at the moment but they could hear it grunting up the path just behind them. James thought quickly. He pushed his sister in the direction of the descending fork. "RUN, that way!" he demanded pointing down the barely visible path. I'll distract it up this way. It can't run as fast up hill following me—GO!"

Lisa could hear the animal closing in. She wanted to argue but if James had a plan, it would probably work. She nodded and then darted as quickly as she could down the other path.

Adrenaline pumped through James' veins as he watched Lisa vanish into the woods down the side trail while he'd stood in plain view of the big animal lumbering up the main path. His plan worked. It began following him instead of her. But the massive bear was a lot faster running up hill than James had thought. It was closing the distance between them!

He had maybe one chance. There was still food in his daypack. Still sprinting, he slipped the pack from his shoulders and zipped opened the top of it. He turned it upside down and



dropped it, letting its contents spill out on the path. He didn't look back.

After a few minutes he was nearing the summit of the mountain ridge again. He stopped to rest breathing heavily. If the bear was still following him it was going have one very tired dinner. He listened intently, his heart still pounding heavily in his ears, but there was no sound or sign of the huge bear.

\* \* \* \* \*

After several minutes of running, Lisa's own adrenaline had run its course and she slowed and then stopped to rest cautiously, catching her breath and listening for any sound of the pursuing bear.

It was quiet in the forest all around her.

The trail she'd run down had forked several times heading down the mountain and now it had literally vanished into thick fern and underbrush on the steep hillside. She thought about calling out for James, but that might attract the bear as well. She frowned to herself and kept quiet as she attempted now to backtrack herself to the mountain trail she'd just run from.

\* \* \* \* \*

A solid hour passed before James chanced descending the path again. He wanted to give the bear time to finish off their lunch and hopefully wander off.

Descending the path once again, James rounded the corner where he'd dropped his daypack. Litter from the pack was everywhere all over the trail and the light nylon of the daypack had been shredded like it was paper. The food was gone. James

collected the litter and attempted to contain it within what remained of the knapsack.

He wondered if Lisa was alright and where she was right now. 'God, please let her be alright,' he prayed silently to himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lisa pulled her iPhone from the side pocket of her hiking shorts and looked at the signal strength. It still showed the 'no signal' icon. Without a connection even the satellite map would be useless. It was now official. She was completely lost.

Several hours had passed since the encounter with the huge bear and despite her best efforts to retrace her steps back up the steep mountainside to the main path, every trail she seemed to encounter just disappeared into more thick underbrush.

The part of the mountain she now found herself on had become steep and rugged. She lifted her hand to look once again at the sun through the tall thick pines. It was getting very low now. She knew James would be looking for—

Suddenly, without warning Lisa's footing slipped. Her legs gave out and she tumbled several yards down the mountainside. Before she was able to stop sliding her foot began complaining—loudly. She finally brought herself to a quick stop on the steep hill, but the sharp throb that now shot through her ankle was more pain than she had felt in a very long time. The stabbing ache was making her eyes well. She lifted her leg with her hands behind her knee, biting her lip, and just let her throbbing foot complain. After several minutes the initial shock of the injury was over but her ankle now hurt like hell.

"OHhh!" she fought back tears trying to ignore the throbbing. "Good job, Lisa," she muttered to herself through

the pain. Could her bad luck get any worse? Then it struck her that it probably could get worse. That bear might still be able to track her down to eat her. That ill thought motivated Lisa to pick herself up and begin hobbling painfully down the hillside looking for less steep ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had long set behind the mountain. James had a sizable bonfire going in a small campsite clearing next to the trail that lit up the area nicely. He hoped the firelight could be seen by his sister, wherever she was. But as the dusk drew darker, the only thing his campfire attracted were the small posse of the uniformed rangers who had already been out looking for Lisa. He greeted them again. They told him what he already knew was coming. They wouldn't be able to search for his sister in the dark. They'd organize a morning search party at first light. The rangers helped James extinguish the fire. He followed them off the mountain calling out for Lisa, wishing he'd never even gotten out of bed this morning.

## 2

**T**hrough the pine needles of the low branches that had been her shelter, Lisa could barely make out the first light of dawn. Most of the pine straw she'd covered herself with had fallen away during the night but it still covered her bare legs. Her foot felt a little better but it continued to ache terribly.

The morning air was still and cold. Lisa pulled her solid red flannel shirt tighter around herself, but the material wasn't very thick and even it felt cold around her skin.

She pulled out her phone and turned it on—or at least she tried to. It didn't even flicker to the dead battery screen. She frowned and put it away. Lisa waited under the tree until she could see more light. Her stomach growled from a lack of food from the night before. She found the other half of her granola bar that had been last night's dinner and finished it.

Lisa emerged cold and stiff from beneath her tree into the cool forest air, brushing the dust and pine needles from her clothes. Now fully daylight, the morning air felt crisp against the bare skin of her legs. She pulled again at her flannel shirt for some warmth. In the distance she thought she could hear water breaking in the stillness. That was good. A stream meant civilization—eventually.

Hobbling down a heavily treed hillside, all Lisa could do was listen for the sound of flowing water. She could hear it much more clearly now, but had no idea where it was. She was glad when the hillside eventually began to slope more gently. Her ankle was not happy about the angle of the mountainside and it complained less when she was finally able to begin walking on more level ground.

Although the slope of the mountain had grown flatter now, it was still heavily treed within the ominous rugged terrain. Lisa had descended into a kind of canyon where rocky cliffs jetted upward on the far side.

She could see the stream now. It was a lot bigger than she'd imagined, filled with small to huge smooth boulders and fast rushing water. It was not the friendliest stream she'd ever seen but it had large pools of still water here and there. If this had been spring, she imagined that most of the smooth boulders would be covered in melting snow runoff. Now summer, most of the winter runoff was gone and though sizable, the stream was easily crossable as she climbed, hobbled and hopped from stepping stone to rock to boulder.

It was on one of these huge boulders that Lisa now lay in the warming morning sun. Although the rock itself was still cold, the sun warmed her skin quickly.

'This would be a good spot to be if a search helicopter flew overhead,' she thought. 'But would there even be a search helicopter?' she then wondered. She'd never been lost but had heard news reports of search and rescue parties using them.

Then she wondered if she'd have to *pay* for the rescue effort? She hoped not.

Eventually the sun warmed her boulder and she had to unbutton her flannel shirt to expose the navy tank she wore beneath it. She hoped Mom and Dad, and James were not worrying too much. She was sure her parents would have half the denomination praying for her safety if not the whole church out searching for her by now.

Lisa sat up on her boulder and stared worriedly into the deep pool that had been formed by the many huge boulders like the one she was sitting on. The water was absolutely crystal clear and looked deep.

Her worried thoughts were abruptly sidetracked when she noticed several parallel lines at the bottom of the pool. She squinted her eyes a bit, trying to figure out what would cause the odd symmetry. Through the slow-churning surface of the pool she eventually focused on a metal grate nestled between two of the larger boulders at the bottom of the pool.

'Huh?' her mind mulled. She was in the middle of nowhere. But this was clearly a sign of civilization! Her mood immediately lifted. Obviously, she was not as lost as she had thought. The grate had to cover some kind of pipe maybe that fed a lot of water to somewhere. All she needed to do was find where it led.

Lisa jumped up nursing her aching foot. It seemed to her that the grate's pipe ran underground along the opposite shore perhaps? She wasn't sure. If the pipe was buried, she'd never really know where it led, but it had to lead somewhere.

On the far shore of the stream she walked through the dense drooping branches of pines and underbrush. Through the trees she could tell that the canyon had begun to narrow and the water of the stream had grown much faster than it had been just a mile or so back. The trees were slowly being replaced by more rocky terrain and the water had now grown

savage moving through them. The roar of the water had replaced any sound of the forest around her.

As she cleared what she thought would be her last rock before the stream had completely taken over the canyon, she saw what looked like the symmetry of civilization again. Through the dense trees she could barely make out what looked like the edges of a structure. A part of something concrete jetted out slightly from the hillside and over the water. It was wholly covered by trees and vines and tucked seemingly clandestinely into the side of the canyon. Lisa hobbled her way across the rock she was on and moved through undisturbed thick forest fern and shrubs toward the structure. It was definitely some kind of building with an immense concrete roof that merged seamlessly with the treed hillside. Beneath the thick, massive roof was an obvious concrete building of some kind, heavily covered by an overgrowth of greenery and the surrounding pines and boulders. Whatever it was, it blended very well into the hillside.

Lisa approached the odd, bunker-looking structure with curiosity. Was it part of an old abandoned dam, the entrance of an old mine or something else? As she approached, she could see a kind of concrete terrace that jetted out a little over the water below. The terrace started at the sides and then wrapped around to the front. She stepped onto the walkway and carefully looked around the corner. While the side of the building was overgrown and looked unkempt, the walkway over the unruly stream had been completely cleared of any vines, leaves and undergrowth.

Filtered morning sunlight streamed through the dense trees from above and onto the concrete deck. Rather than being the ominous sterile-looking structure that it was from the side, the front of it was very different. The entire front side was a thick glass wall set a few feet back from the concrete roofline. The terrace appeared to be a well-kept patio complete with nice

chairs and a table. She peered into the glass from the corner of the building. The inside looked like a house. And a well-to-do one at that. There were pieces of fine furniture, a couch and chairs, even a grand piano.

Lisa forgot the worry of being lost as her feelings turned to deep curiosity. 'Who would be living all the way up here? And with such elegance?' She cautiously made her way onto the terrace and then to what looked like a pair of front doors. The doors were just large sections of the heavy glass wall, but the one she tried slid almost effortlessly open. Once inside she closed the door quickly and quietly. With the large heavy door closed, the roar and sound of the water below outside was now just ambient noise that barely penetrated the soothing warmth of the home's grand interior.

The inside of the home had been more than well decorated; it was like looking at something out of a *Veranda* magazine. The space was huge, warm, elegantly modern, with clean lines and fine art. Although large, with tall ceilings, the home felt cozy with indoor greenery and soft touches of comfort. The polished and reflective large-tile floor reminded her of some of the fine hotels she been in while on modeling trips.

The whole home was a kind of open area, with the massive roof resting on four colossal smooth stone columns that supported what must be the enormous weight of the hillside above. The pillars extended up into what looked like a fine wood drop ceiling with finished square and rounded trays that marked the different sections of the hugely open space. Modern recessed spotlights spread a nice warm glow throughout the whole home.

A grand central spiral staircase led down to another level of the home. The columns separated the large open space into distinct areas with an open kitchen set back against the middle of the far back wall. Only the front of the home had glass that one could see outside. Oddly, the windows seemed to extend



all around the sides of the home as well. But the side windows were all covered with the concrete façade on the outside. Lisa struggled with why someone would put windows around concrete that no one could actually see out of, but maybe the concrete had been added later to keep the hillside from coming inside. It made some sense.

Lisa wandered into the home a bit more. She could hear water running, a shower maybe, from one of the corners of the home.

Although lost, she wasn't about to just barge into someone's home, especially one so remote. She didn't know who lived here. Someone who obviously valued his or her privacy. Still, she was completely lost and out of options.

"Hello?" she called out nervously. "Hello, does anyone live here? Hello?"

She walked around one of the massive central pillars to stand just outside of what was obviously a bedroom area. A large king bed with plush bedding was unmade; the room looked well lived in.

She heard the shower cut off. A moment later Lisa watched as a tall and very well built man with broad, muscular shoulders, large arms and powerful-looking thighs emerged from behind a granite-tiled shower wall. His hair wetly tossed, he was still drying his face with a short plush towel that draped from his hands and only barely coved his front.

"Hello?" she called, feeling really embarrassed for catching someone just coming out of the shower.

He quickly brought the towel down from his face revealing a very startled young man, a look of deep surprise all over his face. It was obvious he'd not heard any of Lisa's previous 'hello's'. The handsome stranger quickly turned away giving Lisa a quick view of his smoothly rounded backside, thick thighs and muscular back, while he dashed the towel around

himself. Although the short towel was a bit small for a wrap-around, he managed to tuck it around himself.

With his short towel now covering everything below his waist, he turned back around to look at her. Lisa couldn't help but be impressed by his chiseled build. She'd seen some nice looking guys on her beach shoots, but this guy bested all of those with his broad, well-defined pecs and rippled abs. She had to deliberately tear her eyes away from the rest of him to look at his face. Despite his towel-dried wet hair, the face of the twenty-something guy appeared just as handsome as the rest of him.

His startled look faded as he studied her curiously for several moments.

Then he said, "Are—are you lost?"

# 3

**L**isa breathed a sigh of relief, "Yes!"  
He nodded now with a look of understanding. "You're that girl everyone's been searching for since last night."  
Lisa nodded. "I got chased by a bear and separated from my brother and couldn't find my way back to him!"

"Wow. You slept outside all night? Are you alright?" he asked, real concern rising in his voice.

Lisa nodded. "I'm fine. Well, except for my ankle. I'm, I'm pretty sure I sprained it," she favored it taking a hobbled step. It still really hurt.

"You sprained your ankle?" he asked, now walking toward her. "Here, you need to sit down."

He lifted her arm around his shoulder and helped her into the kitchen. His freshly showered skin was warm to her touch and the muscles of his broad shoulders felt like nothing Lisa

had ever touched before. He effortlessly helped her to one of the kitchen's barstools.

"So, your name is Lisa?" he asked making his way around the kitchen's bar and to a mug rack that had several types of colored mugs.

She nodded. "Lisa Kyle. I suppose I'm all over the news by now."

He nodded, "Yea, pretty much. My name's Kent."

"Pleased to meet you, Kent," she smiled. Lisa couldn't help but notice how well the partially wet towel hugged his waist and barely covered his handsomely rounded ass. She kicked herself for having such thoughts when this was clearly not the time or the place. Still ...

"Let me get you something hot; coffee, tea, cocoa?"

"I usually do tea, but I think I could really use a cup of coffee right now."

"Anything in it?"

"Loaded with cream and sugar, please."

"No problem," he smiled at her with an amazing set of dimples.

Lisa watched as Kent brewed her some coffee from a *Keurig* all the while still wrapped in his all too small damp towel. Kent's back and shoulders were a near mesmerizing set of flexing muscles as he worked. She couldn't help staring. She'd met a lot of other buff guys before, but there seemed to be an almost immediate chemistry with her and her towel-wrapped host. Tearing her gaze from his towel, again, she had to keep reminding herself that she was lost.

"There you are," he said, sitting the cup in front of her along with a nice chrome spin-tray of various coffee flavorings.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, fixing up her cup and then taking a long hot sip from it. It felt wonderfully warm going down.

"Kent, your place here is, really amazing," she offered. "A nice house all the way up here? It's incredible."

He nodded. "Thanks, um; listen, Lisa; I don't get many visitors up here. Actually, I don't get *any* visitors up here. I apologize for being so startled."

"It's alright. I can see; you like your privacy."

"Well, it's not by choice, I assure you."

"I'm sorry?" she responded, sipping more of the hot coffee with obvious enjoyment.

"Let me get dressed and we can talk over breakfast. You must be starving."

"Famished," she offered.

"I'll only be a minute or two. Will you be alright?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded.

Kent smiled his dimples at her once again and she watched him, and his towel, walk muscularly around the big pillar and disappear into the bedroom.

Lisa must have been very thirsty; she was just getting to the bottom of her cup when Kent came out into the kitchen. He'd dried and styled his hair, dressed in very short khaki hiking shorts and a white collarless stretch shirt that failed to hide even the smallest detail of his chiseled physique. His clothes were a bit over-the-top in emphasizing his fabulous body, but, Lisa wasn't going to be judgmental—Kent had a marvelous build. Besides, she'd dressed to emphasize her own curves on more occasions than she could count. If she were a guy with Kent's body, she had to admit, she'd do the same. Kent had said he didn't get any visitors up here. Maybe he was trying to impress her? If he was, he'd succeeded.

Aside from Kent's body, that little detail of never getting any visitors had really piqued her curiosity. 'It's not by choice ...' she replayed in her mind. What had he meant by that? His

words had been rolling around in her thoughts ever since he'd left the kitchen to get dressed. Now that Kent was back, maybe she could get the 411 on that comment and his odd luxury home tucked way up here in the mountains.

"Lisa, should we have a look at your ankle?" he asked, an elastic bandage box in his hand.

"Probably. Don't tell me you're a doctor?"

"No, but I've treated a few sprains. They're not fun."

'Wow,' Lisa mused silently to herself, 'Kent is certainly being thoughtful.' She watched as he carefully unlaced her hiking boot far enough that it practically fell off her foot by itself. He carefully rolled back her thick wool-cotton hiking sock to reveal a slightly swollen and ugly bruised ankle.

"Ooh," Lisa cringed at the sight of black and blue on her own foot. "How bad is it?"

"Move it around as best you can for me."

Lisa moved her foot in several directions, some of which were really painful. "Ow!" she grimaced when the movement obviously went to far. "It looks bad."

"Actually, you still have good movement. I don't think you tore anything too badly. You made it all the way here. We can put the wrap on it if you like," he said nodding toward the box on the counter.

"It feels better just to have my boot off of it."

"Okay, just let me know and I'll wrap it for you," he offered. Kent carefully rolled her sock back onto her foot to keep it warm, then stood up and gave her a smile. "What would you like for breakfast?"

'You,' she smirked jokingly to herself as she watched Kent walk into the kitchen. At least the situation had not dampened her mirth. Kent stood on the other side of the counter. In his white stretch shirt he looked like a short-order cook waiting to take her order.

"I'm not picky, Kent, but I am a vegetarian."

"Really? I guess that makes two of us then," he revealed, a look of intrigue crossing his face. "So, how about some blueberry Greek yogurt and granola? I also make pretty awesome omelets, if I do say so myself."

"Honestly, Kent, right now, anything you have would be wonderful."

"All of the above then, coming right up," he smiled.

Lisa watched him pull a carton of eggs and a branded blueberry yogurt container from the large built-in refrigerator, along with a box of cereal from a cabinet.

"Kent," she began, "if you don't get visitors how do you keep yogurt and eggs in your refrigerator? Come to think of it, how do you get electricity all the way up here?"

"I'm totally off the grid. I think the house is hydro-powered, from the stream somehow."

"I saw a pipe grate in one of the pools upstream. It's what led me here actually."

"Really? You saw that? I've wondered about that too. I thought it was pretty well concealed though. I guess it isn't," he mused, stirring and then spooning some of the light blue yogurt into a small serving bowl and then handing it to Lisa.

"So where do you get fresh yogurt?"

"I sort of have it delivered."

"How? There's no way to get up here? Not very easily anyway," she said taking a bite. It tasted wonderful.

Kent just smiled at her and poured some granola into another bowl.

"I can't wait to contact my folks and tell them I'm alright."

Kent put down the cereal box. Lisa saw the handsome features of his face suddenly fall.

"Lisa," he began, his tone becoming quite a bit more serious. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Lisa blinked at him. "Oh, don't tell me you don't have a phone?"

"No, I have a phone. A good one; it works, even way up here."

"So what's the bad news?"

Kent took a very visible breath. "You can't call your folks."

Lisa blinked at him again. What he said seemed to stun her momentarily. "I'm sorry? I can't call my folks?"

Kent shook his head.

"Ah, why not?" she asked carefully, a sudden odd chill crawling over her skin. She set her yogurt spoon down in the bowl.

Kent frowned, pressing his lips together. "Lisa, you can't leave."

A sudden wave of horror flooded over her. Unwelcomed thoughts began washing through her mind. What was Kent saying!? Was he holding her prisoner here? She'd survived the mountainous Cascade wilderness with its wild cats and grizzly bears only to be undone by a mountain man holed up in some remote chalet?!

Kent must have seen the look on her face because he backed away to the far kitchen counter, like he was giving her some space.

A noticeable nervousness entered Lisa's voice. "W—what do you mean I—I can't leave?" her last words quivering. "Are you telling me I'm some kind of prisoner here?"

"No, no," he began shaking his head emphatically, "you're *not* a prisoner, Lisa. You—you just can't leave."

There was an earnest sincerity in Kent's voice; it was odd, almost pleading. It didn't make any sense. She tried to process in her mind what she was hearing with the kind and unthreatening demeanor of the man who stood before her. Lisa's thoughts took another sudden turn; her impulsive fear began to fade into curiosity.

"I'm not a prisoner?"

"No," Kent assured her.



"But I can't leave," she reiterated curiously.

"Right," he nodded.

"What if I left anyway?"

Kent looked her in the eye. "Then I'm a dead man."

# 4

**K**ent! Are you serious?! This is a joke, right!? A joke?"

"It's no joke, Lisa," the look on Kent's face and his tone were completely serious. "You've somehow managed to wander into a lot more than just a girl getting herself lost in the woods."

Lisa thought about what Kent was saying. She looked around at the house and then back at him, at how unthreatening he was attempting to appear despite his intimidating body. If Kent had wanted to do her harm he could have done so at any moment and not been challenged at all by Lisa.

"Kent, who are you? What is this place?" she asked, now very curious, her thoughts stumbling over themselves.

Kent sighed. "You're in a safe house, Lisa. A maximum security safe house."

‘Safe house,’ she mouthed. Of course! It made sense now. The government set up safe houses for people who were in witness protection programs; to keep them safe from really bad criminals who wanted to kill them before they could testify during their trials. They were very secret and the people in them high-value witnesses. And now Lisa had lost her way and stumbled right into the middle of what was obviously a super-secret one, very well hidden deep within the Cascades. Evidently the government *really* wanted to keep Kent out of the reach of somebody—probably from somebody who *really* wanted him out of the way.

Kent could see the lights going on in Lisa’s head, the looks flashing across her face. He moved back to the counter opposite her and pushed aside the box of granola. He folded his hands together on the cool granite and looked at her. She was nodding her sudden understanding.

“Lisa,” Kent began, “there are only three people on planet Earth right now who know where I am; the guy who delivers my supplies; me, and now you. And not even the supply guy knows my name, what I look like, or even who I am.”

Kent could see that Lisa’s thoughts were already conflicted. ‘She’s smart,’ he thought to himself. She was already way ahead in where this conversation was going. That was good.

“I can’t even call my folks,” she offered, still deep in thought.

“Because they’ll want to know where you are. They’ll ask you how you were able to call them in an area where no cell towers exist,” Kent finished.

“And if I just leave and show up perfectly fine by some road somewhere it will raise questions I won’t be able to answer,” she added.

Kent nodded. “They’ll ask how you were able to survive for days and days and then walk out of these mountains with

a sprained ankle. How did this young woman live like a mountaineer off the land for weeks?" he asked rhetorically.

Lisa looked blankly past him, thinking. "But—Kent," she began, worry suddenly entering her voice, "in a few days, if they don't find me—they'll abandon the search. They'll think I died up here somewhere," her voice quivered. "My family will be devastated! I can't do that to them!"

Kent frowned deeply, sadly, nodding remorsefully. He could see her eyes beginning to mist as unwelcomed thoughts and feelings of despair rose and moved through her. He felt really sorry for her and then, as beautiful as she was, wished he'd never laid eyes on her.

"Kent, who are you?!" she asked point blank, her eyes now beginning to well.

"I can't tell you that, Lisa," a large lump growing in his throat. "The less you know the safer you'll be."

"Kent, seriously!" Lisa suddenly lost it.

The emotion he knew was coming finally spilled out from her as deep sadness washed over her face.

"You tell me I can't leave!" she bawled. "Tell me I can't go home to see my family! Make them think I'm dead!? And then you won't tell me why or even who you are!? I'm already in this deeper than I know," she cried, thinking of her parents and of James and the terrible loss they would feel.

Kent let his head fall between his shoulders. He felt her pain. He knew exactly her anguish. When he raised his head to look at her his own eyes had begun to more than just mist.

"You!" she sniffed looking at him. "Why are you crying? You're not the one whose parents and whole family are going to think you're dead—"

Lisa stopped short. Her mouth suddenly fell open.

"Oh my gosh! Kent! Don't tell me no one knows—?"

He pursed his lips together, shaking his head, while failing to hold back his own watering eyes. "My family thinks I'm dead too, Lisa."

Lisa left her chair and moved hobbling to where Kent was. He might have been a perfect stranger but she wrapped her arms around him anyway. It was just the kind of person she was. Kent couldn't help himself. He held Lisa gently, sharing her pain and tears with his own.

# 5

THE LIFEBLOOD OF GOD SHALL MOVE UNSEEN DRAWING  
TOGETHER THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MEN

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

**T**heir embrace was tearful and very long; two strangers sharing the same pain. The weight of Lisa's new 'imprisonment' had landed hard on her while Kent steadied her in his arms. He was a little surprised by his own tears, tears that had suddenly tickled out while holding this unexpected and amazingly beautiful girl.

But what intrigued Kent the most was the duration of their embrace. Here was this beautiful young woman, a stranger he'd never seen before in his life, yet, he didn't want to let her go, ever. He waited for her to pull away even after their tears had ended, but she just continued holding on to him. It was

obvious that there was some kind of attraction between them. But he'd never felt anything like this with anyone before. The feeling was odd, powerful.

"Lisa?" he began, his voice low and quiet, still holding her close. "Do you—feel something? I mean, I think I could stand here all day holding you."

"It's not just me then?" she admitted, looking at him. "I thought it was just me being emotional."

"Is that what this is? Just the emotion of the situation?"

"I guess," she sighed, still not pulling away.

The two of them continued to hold each other warmly for many long minutes until Lisa's ankle complained. Kent warmly pulled away and deftly lifted Lisa from the floor, carrying her the short distance back to her chair on the other side of the breakfast bar. Their fingers continued to touch each other's arms until Kent moved away back to the other side of the counter. It was like they didn't want to let go of touching each other.

"This is—" Kent began, "odd."

Lisa nodded. "Yea."

"So I'm not just imagining this? I mean, I really didn't want to let go of your hand a moment ago."

"I didn't want you to," she admitted.

"I feel like I've been drugged or something."

"Kent, it's obviously the situation we're in. This is serious. You have people who want you dead and now I'm caught in the middle of it. This is all very emotional, for the both of us."

Kent nodded, still not sure if Lisa was altogether right about how he was feeling.

Breakfast was mostly quiet as they ate together, both deep in thought about each other and what to do about Lisa's sudden and unexpected discovery of Kent's safe house.

"Kent," Lisa broke the silence softly, "thank you for breakfast."

He offered her a smile. "My pleasure," he said quietly.

"Would it be okay if I used your shower? I'm really feeling grungy. I think the hot water might help me relax, maybe give some time to relax and think about what I'm doing."

"Of course," he encouraged. "There's also a nice tub in there as well. You're more than welcome to use either. There aren't any doors in the house, so, I'll just be over here in the study until you're done," he motioned toward the back of the home that was opposite the master suite and bath. "You can borrow some of my clothes if you like until we can clean yours."

Kent watched Lisa limp slowly around the massive pillar and into the master suite. He began cleaning up their breakfast dishes until he heard the water running in the tub. He relaxed in a favorite chair in the study and surfed one of the local media sites looking for updates on the missing hiker. Hundreds of people from a local church were now out looking for her. Kent hoped none of them would be unlucky enough to also get lost or lucky enough to find his concealed home here in the mountains like Lisa had accidentally done. He'd been told that the home had been here for decades and survived unnoticed after dozens of searches, hunters and even wildfires. No one had ever found it.

But somehow, Lisa had. That fact, more than anything, really triggered Kent's curiosity. God, the Universe, Karma or something had destined Lisa, of all people, to find him. Sure, he had been terribly lonely for months on end now. There were always video games to play and movies and television shows to watch; but there had been no one to actually talk to. Kent was forbidden from venturing too far out from the house. To fill his spare time he took advantage of the universal gym in the basement of the home. After months and months of



following a workout regime he'd bulked up well. He had always been a kind of skinny guy—but his family would be proud, if they even recognized him now.

Mostly, Kent felt really sorry for Lisa, because she was now trapped in the same tangled web that had ensnared him. However, he couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder that she was even here. It made no sense.

And their odd attraction. Where was *that* coming from? Maybe Lisa was right; cooped in the mountains for as long as he'd been and the emotion of the situation was probably at the root of that. Still, the attraction seemed a little more than just emotion. He wasn't exactly an overly emotional kind of guy. There was something visceral here; something ...

"Kent?" he heard Lisa call his name. He left the chair and wandered into the master suite. Lisa's clothes were sitting neatly piled next to the tiled entrance of the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" he asked keeping his eyes away from the bathroom area.

"I'm fine, but could you please get me a glass of water?"

He smiled at the request and walked in to see Lisa resting in a tub full of bubbles. Her hair was wet and pulled back. Even with wet hair Lisa was unusually beautiful. He went to the bedroom cooler and took out a small blue bottle of *Saratoga*. He uncapped the chilled bottle and walked it to her.

"Is this okay? I can get you a glass."

"Is that water?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," he nodded with a smile.

Lisa took the bottle and drew a long drink from it. "I guess I'm still dehydrated from being lost."

Kent sat down on the edge of the tub. Lisa looked at him curiously. She'd only wanted some water but it looked like Kent had parked for some conversation. She didn't mind. She had more than enough bubbles.

"Lisa," Kent began, looking at her with a kind of inquisitive expression, "why are you here?"

The question was odd, but salient at the same time.

"That's a really good question. You tell me?"

"I don't know, that's why I asked," he mused.

"I think I was sort of asking the same question to myself a moment ago. Why is this happening to me?"

He nodded. "My life was shattered because of something someone else did. Your life is now shattered because of me."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't think so, Kent. It's not your fault you're here. If I'm stuck here, it's because of the same person or persons who put you here. Besides, I wouldn't exactly call living up here 'shattered'," she motioned looking around at the open luxury bathroom and bedroom beyond. "More like, inconvenienced."

"Well, you're a bigger optimist than I am then."

"Optimist?," she scoffed. "You don't know me. Optimist isn't exactly the title I'd choose for myself. Maybe God put you here for a reason and the same for me."

"I don't know. I'm not exactly on speaking terms with God at the moment," Kent admitted.

"That would be a lot of us," she assured.

Kent thought about Lisa's words for a long moment, then nodded.

"Lisa, I know you don't want to be here, so this may sound really selfish, but, I'm glad you're here."

"Kent," she lifted her hand out of the bubbles to rest it on his. "I have to admit, this would not be my first choice for starting out life after college, but I can tell you this, if I had been in your shoes first, I know I'd be saying the same thing to you."

He smiled and squeezed her bubble-soaked hand. The touch of Lisa's warm hand in his own delivered something beyond just the sensation. This wasn't just his imagination. There was something more than just the emotion of their

situation there. He may not know what that something was, but whatever or whoever Lisa was, it was almost electric between them. He didn't bring it up.

Kent scooped up a finger-full of the suds and tipped them onto her nose in a playful gesture. "I'll put your clothes in the wash."

\* \* \* \* \*

The home had most of the amenities of the modern world. Lisa found a blow-drier but no hot rollers or even a straightening iron. Obviously, Kent didn't need or use them. Still, this was hardly roughing it. She felt a little odd rummaging around Kent's things looking for something to wear. Either Kent had an eclectic sense of fashion, or this house had been used by several people over the years and who ever ran the safe house had kept some of their things around. She figured it was probably the latter.

Unfortunately, it seemed none of the previous occupants had been women. Most of the newer clothing was Kent-sized; not exactly fitting for her model figure. Lisa managed to make do with some of his Lycra boxer trunks, tan khaki hiking shorts held up with a belt, and a black polo that hung loosely on her shoulders. She felt the darker color might better hide her chest's current bralessness.

Lisa found Kent in the study playing a game on an iPad. He put down the tablet and stood up when she walked in.

"Wow," he began obviously impressed, "my stuff looks even nicer on you."

Lisa found a smile; glad that someone was happy with her. She wasn't very happy with herself at the moment.

"How is your foot doing?"

"Better. It feels better the longer I'm off of it."

"You should let me wrap it for you."

Lisa nodded and took a seat on the study's deep couch as Kent fetched the bandage from the kitchen. She rested her leg on his as he very carefully began wrapping her foot.

"So how long have you been up here?" she asked. She watched as a frown drift across his lips.

"You want to know how long you're going to be stuck here," he ventured.

"I do."

"Twenty-two months and five days."

"Almost two years? Is that normal?"

"No. They said it would be for eight or nine months at the most."

"Why has it been so long?"

"Because the other side is very dangerous."

"Who's this 'other side' and why do they want you dead?"

Kent stopped wrapping for a moment. "Lisa, the less you know about me the safer you'll be."

"Kent, do you really think the people on this 'other side', as you call them, are going to think twice about letting me live if they find us? Honestly? They're not going to waste time trying to figure out what I know or don't know. I'll be just as dead as you."

Kent saw the seriousness in her face and went back to wrapping.

"I have something they want."

"Maybe you should start from the beginning."

Kent looked at her and nodded.

"I was like you a few years ago, fresh out of college. I had a computer science degree with a minor in politics. A real geek."

Lisa looked at the muscular guy carefully wrapping her foot. He hardly looked like the 'geek' or 'poli-sci' type.

"I had some friends of the family in high places in D.C. So when I graduated I got a really nice job in a small datacenter. I

basically ran secure mail servers for a number of government agencies."

Lisa's eyes grew wider with interest.

"So one day, I'm minding my own business when my boss, Chuck, comes in with this flash drive. He puts it in my hand and then says, 'Kent, hold onto this for me and don't let anyone know I gave this to you.' He then walks out without another word. About a week goes by and then Chuck doesn't show up for work. Then a bunch of Secret Service show up and everyone in the center gets the third degree, asking us what we knew about Chuck. I played dumb. After a couple of days they all left, but I never saw Chuck again."

"Did they take him away somewhere?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do with the drive?"

"I hid it; for safe keeping."

Kent finished wrapping her ankle. The bandage felt good as she continued to rest her legs over Kent's.

"So they must have found out about the drive somehow and then came after you?"

"Yea. Somehow they found out about it, but not from me. They asked about it. Then other people around the office started disappearing. First my manager, Jack, just leaves mysteriously. They said he got a new job but his cell number no longer worked. Then Kirsten got into a really bad hit-and-run accident. She didn't make it. Things were adding up too quickly, so I flew out to see our friend of the family who is, or was I should say, a judge in D.C. Now he does lobbying."

"Kent your family seems really politically connected."

He nodded.

"I told him what had happened and what was happening to my coworkers. He said he'd look into it."

"Did he?"

"Oh, he looked into it alright. That same afternoon I was in the executive lounge at the airport to catch my flight home when this cute airline agent approaches me and asks if she can speak to me privately for a moment. I said sure. She leads me to a private room and introduces me to some guy I've never seen before. Then she just leaves."

"Who's the guy?"

"He doesn't tell me his name. But he starts talking and I suddenly realize that he knows more about me than I think my parents do." Kent looked intently at Lisa. "He says I have two choices. I can go back to the lounge and be dead within a few days or I can enter a WITSEC Program—like, right now. They'll protect me while they figure out what to do with the data that's on the flash drive I have. He then says, 'You have sixty seconds to make your decision.'"

"Oh my gosh, Kent!"

"That wasn't really the hard part, Lisa. It didn't take me five seconds to tell him I was in. I'd already seen what they did to Kirsten. There was no reason she shouldn't have been able to leave the hospital. I talked to her in her room. She was bruised and cut-up but nowhere near critical. Kirsten never left the hospital. They made it look like the accident killed her."

Lisa shook her head in disbelief that someone could be so evil. "So what did they do with you?"

"It was weird, Lisa. I went into a security room with Mr. No-name. He took all my stuff, my ID's, cards, wallet, laptop, even the clothes I was wearing, everything. I was given different clothes and a really good disguise. Then I watched on this video surveillance monitor as some *other* guy with my stuff, my clothes and my same exact build and haircut is coming out of the hall I had been led into."

"A body double?"

"Yea, and all of it just that fast."

"Wow. So where did they take you?"

"They dressed me like one of the ground crew and told me to hitch a ride with some guy named Juan. He'd be waiting for me in the employee parking lot. That was last time I ever saw Mr. No-Name. The next thing I knew, I was on a private jet leaving the country for Canada, then a few more flights on small planes, and then I ride a small pontoon boat with a bunch of Navy Seals into a military base in Seattle and then a stealth helicopter that makes almost no noise drops me off here. That was almost two years ago."

"So how did they fake your death?" she asked.

"They didn't," he offered flatly.

"What do you mean they didn't? You told me that your family thinks you're dead."

"I mean they didn't have to fake it. That flight out of Washington D.C., Lisa, never made it to Dallas, let alone Seattle."

A cold chill fell all around Lisa. Her mouth fell open. "The plane crashed!?"

"It did. With two-hundred forty-six people on-board, including my double. There were no survivors. The FAA ruled the official cause of the 'accident' as 'mechanical failure', but it may as well have been gremlins. It was all covered up."

Lisa was shaking her head in disbelief at the thought of what he'd just told her. She knew of the crash he had been describing. It had been all over the news.

"Kent what kind of people are after you?"

"Evil people, Lisa. The kind who don't blink an eye at murdering two-hundred and fifty people to tie up one loose end."

"Whatever is on that drive must be pretty damning," Lisa was very curious herself now.

"It is, Lisa," Kent assured. "It has names, dates, emails, and transaction details tracking the movement of well over a billion dollars."

“A billion is a lot of money, Kent. No wonder they want you and anyone else out of the way. So do you know who these people are?”

Kent nodded. “Oh yea. Most of them. They’re embedded within the highest levels of our own government, Lisa; and they have unlimited resources.” He paused not sure if he should say any more. Maybe he’d said too much already. But she was right, if they found her with him, she’d be just as dead. Kent looked at her, “Lisa, this data—leads all the way to the White House.”

...

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of AWAKENED is available now! Get your full copy to find out what happens next!