

**THE**  
**SERUM**  
*deception*

**>>> A NOVEL <<<**

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Krouching Tiger  
Publications

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*Dedicated*

*To my God first for giving me this dream and the right people around me to  
make it come true.*

*To Susan Gossic, who has now edited two of my books with excitement and  
skill.*

# CHAPTER

# ONE

**JACK JETT** sighed as he looked around his hotel room then out of the third story window. Today he felt a sense of hopelessness. He really didn't know how to move forward. Having grown up in the compound, Jack had no idea how the real world worked outside of those walls. He was so unsure of where he and Stephanie Nelson should go and how to get there.

To make matters worse he didn't have Drake to ask advice. That self-assured brute would know what to do. Yesterday Drake Garrison and Gale Bailey went back to the island. They had all agreed unanimously that it was the best move to split up so that they could tackle more faster. Jack and Stephanie would find Jack's twin that had spoken in his mind on the boat on the way to the mainland, and they would also find this George Hornfield guy that seemed to be the evil mind and main financier for the compound operations back on the island. Drake and Gale would return to the island to help in uniting and organizing the Nordoms for battle when the time came.

Jack was having second thoughts about splitting up. *We should have stayed together!* Jack grumped.

Drake was better suited for this job because of his unmovable stoic-stubbornness. Too bad there weren't two of him. Drake had a way of making things happen without getting ruffled in the process. Nothing seemed to ruffle Drake – except Gale. Gale decided that she was going to go with Drake, even though he said that she should stay with Jack and Stephanie. There was nothing deterring that spirit of a woman – not that Drake had tried very hard. Jack suspected that the big guy had a soft spot for the little red-head. Drake managed to convince Gale that it was his

way or the highway when he put his foot down, and Gale would follow along – most of the time. They were quite a pair and, looking at them, couldn't be more opposite. They were both stubborn as mules. That could be why it was so much fun to have them around – for the entertainment.

Stephanie knocked on Jack's hotel room door and waited patiently outside. It took a couple of beats before he opened the door with a smile. Stephanie smiled back a bit uncertainly, trying to read him.

"Hi." She said.

"Hi." Jack greeted her. "Come in." He ushered her into the room and went back to stare out the window. He grabbed his coffee cup off the table on his way. When Jack reached his destination, he motioned Stephanie to help herself to the coffee he had made.

Stephanie entered the room and closed the door behind her. She made her way over the small coffee pot provided by the hotel and poured the contents into a paper cup. She ripped open and poured in a couple of packets each of sugar and creamer into her coffee and stirred it around in the cup with a straw stirrer. Holding it just below her nose, Stephanie breathed deeply savoring the smell. It smelled heavenly in the morning. Stephanie took a tentative sip being cautious of the steamy temperature of the beverage and nearly spewed the hot liquid from her mouth. *More sugar. Yes, it definitely needed more sugar, and more cream – more everything. Goodness! This stuff was absolutely terrible!* Stephanie could see Jack's shoulders shake in laughter out of the corner of her eye. She scowled in his direction.

"What are you laughing at? You can't possibly have *liked* the taste of *that* stuff!" She accused.

Jack shrugged. "Actually..." He trailed with a mischievous smile.

Stephanie gaped. "Nuh-uh!" She took a quick step in his direction to peer into his cup, but he angled away somewhat defensively. "Uh-huh. That's what I thought." Stephanie laughed triumphantly. "You haven't drank hardly any, and it's doctored to high heaven isn't it?" She lowered her lids and gave him a closed lip smile in smug boredom.

Jack chuckled sheepishly. "You're almost right. It was *very* doctored, but I just finished it. So, I eventually got it to my liking."

Stephanie grimaced. "I don't think I will ever like coffee." She said this as she ripped open the remaining sugars and poured them in her drink. Jack laughed out loud as she did this and went back to staring out the window. His mirth soon disappeared, and he became very contemplative. Stephanie choked down a few swallows of her drink before giving up. She disposed of it, pouring it down the drain and tossing the cup. She went to stand beside Jack. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at Jack's serious face.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked him quietly as if she were trying not to break his concentration.

"I'm trying to determine our next move." He answered on a sigh. "I'm not sure what to do." His eyebrows dipped as he frowned. "The guy that's supposedly my twin is not thinking very clearly, so it's hard to keep tabs on him or his location."

Stephanie listened in silence as she, too, frowned trying to determine what she could say to be encouraging. She was just as lost as Jack out here. Before she could come up with something, Jack spoke up.

"I think he's sedated." He spoke slowly as if he were tapping into the connection Drake had secured for Jack with his telepathic ability right then and trying to explain what he could. "That's the only thing that makes sense because of how his mind is so slow... like barely four words per minute. It's really hard to make sense of his thoughts. Mostly he's praying, I think."

"Well, that's comforting that he knows God, at least." Stephanie put in.

Jack shrugged, tilted his head, and raised his eyebrows in agreement to her statement. "I just wish I could get a hold of where he is long enough to nail down his location. We're going to have to move so slow in order to find him, and we're likely to get caught by someone from the island or even by George Hornfield's men." Jack sighed exasperatedly.

"Jack," Stephanie pulled at his shoulder to get his attention. "Snap out of it. We got out of the compound. We're here – safe. You have a twin – family. All this and all you can do is worry? Stop a minute and think of the silver linings glaring at you." Stephanie spoke reprovingly. Then she gestured to the window and looked as if she had had an epiphany. "Or, even just the one about having a twin. We are headed to go find a member of your *family*. Jack, you are going to meet up with a family member, no matter how long it takes. Something that none of us others kidnapped by those men in the compound will probably *ever* have the opportunity to do." Stephanie pressed her lips together and stared deep into Jack's eyes, silently pleading with him to understand what she was saying. "You have so much to be thankful for. You just do the best you can, and we're sure to get there." Stephanie crossed her arms in a way that suggested that she was comforting herself with her words, not just Jack.

Jack released a pent-up breath and stared down into Stephanie's eyes. He smiled wanly. "Thanks, Steph." He squeezed her arm gently. "You're right." He dropped his hand and his gaze and appeared to be reflecting on what she had said.

"I *know* I'm right." She grinned cheekily up at him. "What happened to the guy that got all fired up back at the compound to do something about all that evil going on back there? Where'd *he* go?"

Jack shrugged and scowled out the window.

"We need him to lead this crazy thing so that we can win."

"I just don't think I can." Jack said softly.

“Why not?” Stephanie asked just as quietly.

“The world seemed so much smaller on that island. It’s so big out here.” Jack gestured with both hands out the window. Jack released a heavy sigh. “I don’t have any idea how to navigate this world. It’s too big to telepathically explore. The compound was big, but the whole world is *way* bigger.”

“I’m just as lost out here as you are.” She reminded him. “That’s why we’ll work together on this.” Stephanie said in a placating way.

Jack smiled. “Yeah... ok.” He took a deep breath and seemed to be fortifying himself for the adventure they were about to embark on.

“Hey,” Jack looked down at Stephanie when she spoke. She continued, “I think that you make a great leader. I know from comparing you to Drake.” Stephanie laughed at Jack’s mixed look of confusion and skepticism in her logic. “It’s because he’s just that kind of guy that makes you think of a bull barging through a China shop. He knocks everything into chaos just because he can’t be bothered to worry about those delicate glass pieces while he’s attacking his goal. He’s got tunnel vision.”

Jack snorted in amusement at Stephanie’s description of Drake.

“You take care for the small details in your actions and plans. That’s what will make you a great leader. You can do this, and I believe in you.”

Jack looked slyly down at Stephanie. “How many times do you want me to say ‘thank you’?”

Stephanie laughed.

“Cause you seem a little like you’re gloating over the fact that you’re able to be so much more positive than I am, and keep a straight head on your shoulders. Seems like you’re always setting me straight again.”

“Well, I kind of am...” Stephanie trailed smugly.

“Which one?” Jack raised his eyebrows. “Gloating or setting me straight?”

“Both! Duh!” Stephanie burst in a singsong tone and laughed.

Jack laughed. “All right.” He finally said. “I’ll get my act together and let you know what the plan is.” He smiled down at her in a way that assured her that he was thinking clearly again.

Stephanie smiled back and took a step toward the door. “I’ll be going then. I’m going to pack up my stuff, and I’ll be waiting for you in the lobby.” Jack nodded in acknowledgement. Stephanie nodded exaggeratedly as she took a large step in the direction of the door before swiftly leaving him to his thoughts and to pack up her things like she said she would.

Jack chuckled under his breath and straightened to look out the window again. This time he enjoyed the sun that he saw, and the blue sky, and the colors of the Fall leaves remaining on the trees and just looked. After a minute Jack turned and sunk into one of the two arm chairs placed at the small round table in the corner of his room. He bowed his head and held it in his hands as he rested his elbows on the hard surface of the wood table. He rubbed his temples before looking up to stare at the wall. Time to make a plan.

There to his left, by the phone, was a note pad and pen with the hotel logo on them. That'll do. Jack sat quietly at first and focused on the mental connection Drake had created in Jack's head to help him find his twin. Jack only had impressions of Thane's surroundings from the connection. He had discovered that was his brother's name from listening into his thoughts. Jack began to write down all the things he thought he knew about where he and Stephanie would be heading. So far all he knew was that they were going to need to head toward the west coast. He wrote a few more notes from what he picked up this time from his brother and stood to pack.

Jack swiftly stood and began to unceremoniously throw all of his newly acquired belongings into his backpack. When they had come into port Drake, Gale, Stephanie and him all bought some new clothes and toiletries for their travels, and they each purchased a backpack in which they carried these new belongings. Jack gave his room a once over just in case he forgot something and made sure he didn't leave the place a wreck. He snatched the notepad and pen and swung his backpack over his shoulder then left to find Stephanie in the lobby and check out of their rooms. When they got something to eat, they would discuss how to travel to the west coast. Since they missed breakfast at the hotel, they would have to find something to eat somewhere else.

# CHAPTER

# TWO

**A TAXI** ride and thirty-five minutes later Jack and Stephanie were seated in a fast food restaurant munching away when Jack broke the silence.

“So, I figure that we’re going to need to find ways to make some money as we go along. Our funds are nearly gone already. We only have about three or four dollars left.” Jack informed Stephanie, who raised her eyebrows in concern. “For future I think we should only purchase one room a night. Renting two rooms was pretty expensive. My room had two beds, so I’m sure we could find the same arrangement somewhere along the way.” Jack suggested. Stephanie pinched her lips together to keep from voicing how weird that might be.

Jack smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes completely as if he knew what she was thinking. “We’re also going to need to figure out how to make more money besides just making cuts in where we spend it. Four dollars isn’t going to get us even one room, let alone another meal.” Jack chuckled mirthlessly. “We’re used to working hard, so I figure that we could do anything someone’s willing to pay us for.” This he said with confidence.

“Well... yes.” Stephanie trailed off uncertainly. “But how will we *find* the work?”

“That’s a good question.” Jack turned smug. “Weren’t you the one telling me that we would be fine in the hotel? Something like: just to do our best...” He trailed and wiggled his eyebrows at Stephanie.

Stephanie flushed. “Yes, smarty pants. Way to use my own advice back at me.” She smiled sheepishly.

Jack laughed. “Yep. It was good advice.”

“Yeah. Great advice.” Stephanie said sarcastically. “I still don’t see how we’re going to find work.” As an afterthought, she added. “Where are we going anyway?”

“To the other side of America as far as I can tell.”

Stephanie gaped. “Isn’t that far?”

“Yes. It’s very far.”

“So how are we getting there?”

“I figure we could grab rides from people on the busy roads that could take us in that direction.” Jack shrugged.

“And work?” Stephanie asked uncertainly.

“We’ll ask the drivers if they know of any work around the area. Places or people that will pay cash for a day’s work or two days max. I’d like to keep on the move as much as possible.”

Stephanie nodded appreciatively. “So, you *do* have a plan. You *can* lead.” She winked.

Jack mildly flushed on his neck and brushed it off. “Speaking of moving... we need to go find our first ride.” He said already standing. Stephanie helped clear their trash and followed Jack outside to hitch a ride with, hopefully, a kind citizen.

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Meanwhile...

Thane Jett had been on the run for the last 24 hours since escaping from George Hornfield’s strange house of horrors. It was amazing that he had got out at all; and when he did, he had to face a desert. It wasn’t so bad at first. He had his motorcycle for the first hundred and eighty miles; but then the gas tank ran out, and he had to walk the last 30 miles. That’s when things really got messy.

>Rewind 24 Hours<

Thane was under some heavy sedation. He merely floated in his mind and outside of reality surrounded by pulsing purple goo holding him suspended in mid-air. A large, purple, gooey oval held Thane captive in a dream-like state deep underground beneath George’s mansion for about a week – up until about a minute ago when reality suddenly came flooding back to him.

The burning was back. The serum that had been pumped into his veins began to burn again all throughout his body. The first time it was short-lived, but this time seemed to be making up for that. His veins burned, and then a thick substance was shoved forcefully in behind the serum. This seemed to be having a strange battle at the entrance point in this hands and feet.

Thane's body contorted in pain within the supple substance holding his body. Thane was unable to shout or groan in pain because of the muffling effects of the goo. Finally, the battle ended, and the thick substance sluggishly made its way through his system. The pain was unbearable, but after what seemed like forever, it was finally over.

Thane just breathed. Within about a minute he didn't feel any pain. It was almost as if the terrible agony he had just endured had possibly only been a dream. In surprise Thane gasped in the sudden rush of air on his face, and his eyes burst open wide only to scrunch shut at the blinding light shining through his half-empty cocoon. Thane peeked through his lashes to watch as the remainder of the goo emptied out through the bottom two tentacles attached to the bottom of the purple sphere that he was currently sitting in.

Thane felt pretty sluggish since he had been suspended and unable to move for a whole week. He flexed his toes and fingers, testing them. The sphere was set down, and Thane ducked as it spontaneously cracked and shattered. The pieces showered all around him.

"Thane Jett, please, make your way through the door at the back of the room." A kindly woman's voice came echoing through unseen speakers hidden in the blinding light shining above him. She sounded breathless in a sort of panicked way. Thane craned his neck around to spot the open door the lady was talking about only to be spurred into action. "Quickly, Thane!" The voice urged.

Thane sloppily scrambled to his feet and through the hardened goo shards lying around him and finally through the open doorway. A woman waited for him at the top of a tallish metal staircase to the right of the door. At the top Thane and the woman entered a small, dark room – except for the shining screens on the computers used to control the room that Thane had just come from. The woman held a bottled substance and a wrapped food stuff. Thane had never seen either before.

"My name is Anna. There isn't enough time for you to do anything but trust me." Anna handed Thane the drink and snack and bade him to eat. "These should sustain you until you reach town again." She continued as Thane opened the bottled drink and took a sip of the thick liquid. He grimaced but forced himself to keep drinking. "I urge you to stay off the main roads and go through the desert. Any one of Mr. Hornfield's other men would catch you if you don't." Anna quickly informed him.

"Why are you helping me?" Thane croaked with the disuse of his voice box.

"I told you. There's no time for that." Anna frowned. "Now quickly finish those and follow me." Anna took Thane up a very tall spiral staircase winding up into blackness from the corner of the control room. At the top they cautiously emerged into George's library from behind a bookshelf. "This way." Anna directed. She shoved the bookcase back into place and led Thane to the door. Cautiously she peeked around the library door leading out into the hallway. She only opened it a crack. Before they exited the room, Anna appeared to swallow back her own fear then she turned to address Thane.

“Why–?” Thane began, but Anna cut him off with a scowl.

“Not now.” She said impatiently. “Come quickly.” Anna hurried Thane through the library door and down several halls before they finally reached the grand foyer that had wowed Thane when he first several weeks ago. Thane took a final disgusted look around now that he knew what the purpose of his stay really was. It was amazing that they hadn’t run into anyone except one other person that they easily evaded. Thane made mention of this.

“It’s because Mr. Hornfield is off on vacation to the Philippines, so fewer servants come to the front of the house. Most are in the back in the kitchens and servants’ quarters.” Anna explained. She added. “It’s also why we’re going through the front door and not a back or side door.” Thane blanched at this but said nothing and clenched his jaw instead.

The two found Thane’s motorcycle hidden away in a locked shed. Anna picked the lock and instructed Thane to count to forty, giving her enough time to get away and find herself an alibi, before he started the engine. Thane nodded in understanding. He thanked her before Anna ran off.

“Thank you, Anna.” She only smiled shyly and ran off toward the mansion. Once she was out of sight, Thane began counting.

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The last thirty miles in the desert were hard because he really thought that the town south of George’s place on the horizon was a mirage. Thane covered most of the desert on his motorcycle. He gunned it as far as he could and even rode it as long it rolled on fumes. He was distraught about leaving his prized machine in the middle of the desert, likely to never be seen again. It was his first purchase after getting his first job. It was his mark of independence and freedom from the orphanage that felt so suffocating at the time. He hadn’t been able to get out of there fast enough, then. If only he knew what awaited him... He wouldn’t have been so quick to grow up, especially after this horrible turn of events. He should never have taken George up on his offer. He had been so naïve.

As Thane continued to put his feet one in front of the other, he hoped that the buildings that he saw weren’t a mirage – that Anna was right about the town. There was only one way to find out because he was definitely *not* going back. Thane had continued to push his tired feet through the blistering desert with the sun beating down on him. It had to be about late supper time, and Thane was pooped.

Finally, he had made it! Thane was ready to drop, but he dragged himself onto the town sidewalks on the outskirts of the town. He had to push himself. George would surely have men after him by now. What about Anna?

Thane needed water. He *really* wanted some water. And food. But, he mostly wanted the water. Why was it so hot? What time of year was it – summer? Must be. The *dead* of summer. That's right. Thane was going to be dead – because it was summer – and because there was no water. Where were the stores? There! There was a store! Water! Thane wasn't really paying any attention to his surroundings; neither did he remember that he didn't have any money on him. He only had one goal in mind, and that was to find water.

All those weeks ago when he had made that fateful trip down the golden elevator in George's rich foyer, Thane hadn't thought to put money in his pocket just in case. He was just going down below for a shot then he'd be hanging out at the soda bar upstairs on the second floor or riding an ATV on the grounds. Those had been his plans, anyway. HA! If only he had known, he would have never stayed with George Hornfield in his beautiful trap. Trap. That is exactly what that man's richly furnished mansion had been.

Thane stepped down off the sidewalk and stumbled not realizing that he was crossing a street. Cars honked, and brakes screeched. Thane stopped as his brain tried to process what he had done. Being dehydrated and exhausted with possible heat stroke, Thane stood practically paralyzed in the street with cars dodging him all around.

Just as Thane was coming back to himself enough to move back toward the sidewalk, he caught sight of a blue truck racing right at him. He only had a split second to think that it was odd that while the other vehicles dodged this dazed pedestrian; Thane thought he saw the truck swerve across a lane toward him instead of away. Having no reflexes to speak of, Thane practically stood and watched the truck coming right at him. The last thing he remembered was the impact. The hit knocked Thane unconscious instantly.

# CHAPTER

# THREE

**GEORGE HORNFIELD** burst into the study of his mansion in the Philippines with his anger barely contained. In his fist he clenched a crumpled missive informing him that the escapees from the compound made it off the island and are actually making their way across America to find him. It doesn't matter that he isn't in the USA anymore. What matters is that there are pesky little brats after him. Regardless of whether they are competent or not, they posed a problem and needed to be dealt with.

George sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose just as he reached his enormous and gleaming cherry wood desk. Taking a deep calming breath, he snatched his phone from where it rested on the receiver and punched the speed dial button for the island's direct line to the compound. Impatient, George rolled his eyes as he listened to the phone ring on their end. While he waited, he closed his eyes and finally began to calm down.

He was stressed because he had little to no confidence in his men anymore. Ever since they failed to capture his scientist's daughter and bring her to the compound for leverage on the old man, George's men have consistently been making mistakes. That's another thing! They lost his scientist as well! The useless imbeciles let his scientist walk off the island under their very noses!

George groaned over this loss. They were only going to be able to make enough merchandise to finish off the serum the good Dr. Mark Yassiff had made and left behind. Thankfully they had enough merchandise all ready and waiting for purchase and also leftover serum to make a few more. The doctors back at the compound were doing well weeding through and making lists of the best merchandise for selling. George smiled at all the zeroes floating behind his eyes from

thinking of all the profits he was going to be making from each sale. This really was the best business arrangement – extremely profitable.

“Boss.” The man on the other end answered the phone at last.

“Monroe?” George asked for clarification.

“Yes, sir.”

“I just got your note that was in the foyer waiting for me here in the Philippines. After all these years you’ve decided to let the operation fall apart at the hinges?!” George fumed over the line.

“Monroe, really, what is the meaning of this incompetency?”

“I apologize, sir.”

“Monroe.” George groaned. “‘I apologize, sir.’ Is that all you have to say for yourself? You allowed my *scientist* – the key part of this operation, might I remind you – to get away, and all you have to say is, ‘I’m sorry’?!” George snarled. “You’re an imbecile! How about telling me how this happened instead?”

“Somehow he must have had a contact on the outside with whom he arranged an escape.” Monroe spoke unconvincingly.

“How?” George’s tone conveyed his disbelief in Monroe’s answer.

“I’m not sure. All of his emails have been closely monitored and checked and rechecked before and after he disappeared. He hasn’t sent out any mail. We’ve seen to that. Honestly, sir, I really have no idea how anyone could’ve even known that he was here in the first place.” Monroe sighed his frustration into the phone and into George’s ear. Hornfield grimaced impatiently. “Sir,” Monroe continued, “I interviewed every single person on staff – security included. I am nearly one hundred percent sure that no one on the inside was involved, and no one is holding anything back. No one in the compound or involved in the compound workings on the outside has any idea how anyone could have found or assisted the doctor to escape. I’m at a loss.”

“None of what you have said so far is anywhere *near* what I was hoping to hear.” George said quietly over the phone, barely restraining his frustration.

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Monroe answered with defeated tones from the other end of the line.

“Do you?!” George was incredulous. “You can’t *possibly* understand! *You* don’t know all that is at stake here. *You* have no idea what kind of a headache is chewing on my hind-end threatening me with all kinds of pain if this all comes crashing down. Enough excuses, Monroe! Get me some answers. Get it done *yesterday!*” George Hornfield yelled into the phone and slammed it down on the receiver in a fit. Still in a huff George lit up a cigar and buzzed for his butler to bring him a drink.



A couple of hours and many cups of strong black coffee later, George began making phone calls. He had to contact his men on the continent to capture the nuisances trying to find him. George made a point of not even bothering to call the imbeciles that went to the wrong *continent*, Norway, to find Kelly Yassiff for him. He really didn't have the time nor the patience to pick up the pieces for those kind of mistakes. George needed to get moving on selling the merchandise. Now that he had a decent portfolio to present, and he had a process that worked, George needed to move the merchandise faster. Since there were people out there that could potentially make all his plans and hard labor crumble, George really needed to push sales harder on these rich fools.

George's first call was to Ben Richmen – the man that *almost* didn't fail him. George sighed. His options were just so limited. He really should have invested more time into hiring better help. Balance is the key. He spent too much of his resources and time into the main goal: produce merchandise. That was the most important thing, besides distributing them. He needed to get them spread all over the world. That was what he had been instructed to do. So, that was what he had concentrated on. Because of that, he now had to deal with incompetent men and women that couldn't even snatch a girl and hang onto her for any length of time. George Hornfield was still at a loss as to how Kellie had been kidnapped by his people *twice*, and she still escaped.

Ben Richmen answered His boss's phone call on the second ring. "Sir. What can I do for you?"

"Good question, Richmen. What *can* you do for me *well*?" George sneered.

"Sir?" Richmen asked hesitantly, unsure of what to say.

"Never mind." George growled across the line. "Richmen, I need you to discover the whereabouts of some misplaced merchandise that seems to be on a mission to find me in the states. I'm currently in the Philippines." Hornfield filled his man in before Ben could waste time asking about his whereabouts. "Richmen, do you think you could apprehend them and bring them to me?"

"But, sir, aren't they looking for you?" Ben asked confused about the man's logic.

"Yes!" George snapped. "They are. I would rather you bring them to me and lock them away where I know they cannot interfere with my plans than let them find me unawares and ruin everything!"

"Ok. I understand, sir." Ben answered. "Thank you for this opportunity! I won't disappoint... again." He ended weakly.

"Stop groveling. Just catch the escaped merchandise, and don't muck this up like you did the last time with the girl!" George Hornfield snarled with such venom that the man on the other end of the line feared for not only his job but his very life if he messed up this time.

A similar conversation volleyed across the angry man's phone line with Mitch and Delia. These two were the other of his henchmen that had failed to hang onto Kelly Yassiff. He had even less patience for this pair since they couldn't hold onto her for more than an hour. Ben had at least been able to keep her within reach for a few hours, but not Mitch and Delia. No, they lost the girl after *less* than one hour. Pathetic. He really didn't have much hope that they would bring in the merchandise, but the more eyes on the lookout the better. The more information one had, the more power to control the situation.

George Hornfield decided, as an extra precaution, to call on his men at the mansion to keep a greater vigil on the property in preparation for the arrival of the menaces searching for him. That's how much faith he had in Ben, Mitch and Delia – none.

Once he finished his phone calls, George received a phone call of his own. It was from his butler in Nevada. Because of the news the butler delivered over the phone, Hornfield's pure rage could have burnt everything around him to smoldering ashes. Another specimen was lost. What was happening?!

George burst from the study and found his way to the adjacent drawing room. Long, anger-fueled strides took him over to his bar in the corner. George splashed himself rather large servings of alcohol. He tossed back three tumblers before he decided on a plan of action. Inebriated and not thinking clearly, he slammed his glass down on the counter and rushed to the drawing room door. Swinging the heavy double doors wide, George thrust himself from the room and stood slightly off kilter in the hallway and hollered at the top of his lungs.

"Max-Oane!" George bellowed. He bellowed again and again until the hustling butler came to a halt before his master. The well-trained man barely looked flushed and kept great composure in the sight of his enraged employer. George continued to yell at the poor man. "Max-Oane, we're blowing it up!" Hornfield declared.

"Sir?" The middle-aged butler questioned. "Blowing it up, sir?" He asked slowly.

George suddenly grinned with wide, crazed eyes. He was flushed from his over-indulgence of alcohol and began to believe that his idea was a grand idea. *Too much bad news will do that to a man*, he told himself. *Yes, there's only so much a man could take before he had to deliver bad news to someone else. Yes, that's what I'm going to do. This will feel much better than a right hook to someone's jaw. There's too many of them that I'd like to punch anyway. So, I'll just knock out a whole slew of imbeciles in one foul swoop.*

George began to laugh manically as he walked briskly down the hall toward the basement stairs that normally only the servants used to reach their quarters. The butler followed behind quietly. George and the butler made their way down the stairs, through the kitchen, and down the hall past all the women servants' rooms. Just before they turned to pass the restrooms, George halted to gather his bearings. Straightening his coat, Hornfield turned to the left to stare at what appeared to be a dead end. A brick wall stood before him. The bricks were old and faded. Some

were beginning to crumble. George waved for his butler to get on with it. Max-Oane moved forward with a bow and pressed two unassuming bricks into the wall then pulled an empty old sconce on the right near the adjoining wall.

The brick wall slid to the left with minimal dust disturbance and, except for a dull scraping, no one from the kitchen would hear the noise. George strode through the opening and lights immediately came to life. His butler followed, and the brick wall closed behind them. The room was small with bare cement walls and floors. It held a single computer stationed in the center of the room on a small desk with a grand desk chair. A 110-inch UHDTV dominated the attention in the room as it was mounted on the opposite wall and only a couple of inches of wall surrounded the monstrosity on both sides and on top.

George stared with a wicked gleam at the dark screen. "Max-Oane. Bring up the mansion in Nevada."

The butler complied. He bowed and moved to take a seat at the computer. After tapping away for a few moments, the large screen came to life and gave a satellite view of Hornfield's mansion in Nevada. The beautiful grounds and obvious show of wealth the land and building portrayed caused George to hesitate a moment in his decision. He stared and enjoyed the scene before him. Just as he was about to abort the mission, he recalled the reason for his anger in the first place. His face hardened and his hands fisted and shook at his sides.

"Max-Oane." His voice was low and shook with such anger the butler dared not turn his head for fear his own nervousness might be noticed and bring his master's rage upon himself.

"Yes, sir?" He asked gently in attempt to appease the man's heated state somewhat.

"Load and fire our largest missile. I don't want anything left standing of this place." George seethed, his alcoholic breath puffing from his mouth to disturb a hair on his man's immaculate hair-do.

"Sir?" The butler hesitated.

"Don't ask questions! Do!" George ordered, spittle flung from his mouth to spray the monitor as he also flung himself up against the desk chair to grab hold for balance and in show of his seriousness.

The butler clamped his lips closed against his suggestion of warning the inhabitants and pressed the buttons to ready the requested missile. Before he could get himself to press the button to activate and fire the missile. Max-Oane's conscience pricked him. "Sir..." He hesitated.

"What?!" George Hornfield glared down at the man addressing him.

"The people inside. Should I send an evacuation message?" The butler hoped for the affirmative behind an impassive exterior.

“No.” George glanced back at the image on the big screen TV. “This is their punishment.” He said with such dark venom. Max-Oane turned away from his employer and called upon all of his years of training to remove himself mentally from the situation, so that he would not have to live the experience all over behind the closed door of his quarters that night.

“The missile is ready then, sir.” Max-Oane informed Hornfield in a wooden tone.

“Fire!” George yelled, and his butler obeyed.

There was a moment’s pause before a great explosion, soundless, burst forth huge and bright on the massive flat screen that glared down on the two men watching it. One man had the countenance of one who had mentally removed himself from the situation, but in reality – the man he was on the inside was breaking even though the shell on the outside showed differently. It would be many long hours before he would be able to close his eyes and succumb to sleep without seeing the bright orange and white burst that destroyed a luxurious mansion and so many lives within. Even with the master of the home gone there would be a minimum of forty servants around to keep the home and grounds maintained in his absence. The man beneath the butler’s stoic I wept silently in his heart for the many lost souls.

The other man in the room however seemed to have a moment of great joy! The absurdity! Having just murdered so many people in a simple rage... It wasn’t right. George Hornfield grinned dementedly at the screen satisfied that the people there had paid a decent enough price for allowing Thane Jett to escape his mansion – No! – for *helping* him escape. There wasn’t any possible way that Thane would have been able to get away by himself, dangling in the air in the great big gob of serum that George had trapped him in. As Thane hung, his body would be in a mode of hibernation with only slight consciousness, so that he would be unable to think clearly enough to realize the changes in his body or even to formulate a plan of escape. If it were even possible, which it wasn’t.

George’s rage that had begun to ebb away at the sight of the explosion, began to resurface again. How could they do this to him? Don’t they know what is at stake? No. No they don’t. He was careful to keep them in the dark as he was instructed. They were under his employ, so they should have continued on with the instructions left with them. He began to turn to leave the small room to make another phone call. He turned back for a moment with narrowed eyes. Who could have been the one to do it? George stood contemplating the matter for a few seconds, and then he sniffed. Well, whoever it was, is dead now. With that he turned, and Max-Oane opened the secret door-in-the-wall. George passed him and immediately dialed a couple of his men that were in Nevada near the mansion’s previous location.

“Jargon. You and Bleak need to capture the boy that escaped the mansion. It’s vital to the operations that he doesn’t have a chance to contact the authorities!”

“No need to worry about that, boss.” Jargon answered lazily on the other end.

“What do you mean?” George asked.

“I flattened him with my truck. There’s no way he survived.” Jargon answered smugly.

“Imbecile!” George raged. “I needed him alive!” George seethed through the phone. He began to pace in the dim hallway just a few yards from the bustling kitchen. “Did you make sure that he was dead for certain?” He asked as an afterthought.

It was getting near lunchtime. Max-Oane waited patiently for his master’s orders. George waved him off. Max-Oane nodded his head respectfully then headed toward the kitchen. He was careful not to go too far away or get too busy in case his master needed him shortly.

“Well, no. There’s no way any ol’ human being could manage to walk away from the hit he took from my truck. He dented my fender!” Jargon scoffed.

“He’s not any normal human being. He’s probably still in the hospital.” Hornfield corrected Jargon. “Go find him and bring him to me. Be on guard. He may have discovered some interesting abilities by now.” George ordered his men and promptly ended the call. George prayed hard in his heart to anyone and anything that his men wouldn’t blow this one. He needed to gain control of all this mess before he was paid a visit by the one man on the planet that could intimidate George Hornfield.

**> END OF SNEAK PEEK <**

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Thanks for reading!!! – *Kay Bowser*

