

THE
SERUM
GENESIS

Book One
The Serum Trilogy

KAY
BOWSER



Krouching Tiger
Publications

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Dedicated

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

PROLOGUE

“DADDY!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART

ONE

> 16 YEARS LATER <

CHAPTER

ONE

“HEI, DU!” An angry Norwegian shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

The room he entered was a very aged hotel room. Everything was so old. The room appeared to be merely a very faded picture of what it once had been. John was sure he was breathing in a

couple of species of mold because the room was so musty. With long strides he strode to the window facing the street, not bothering to notice if there was anyone already in the room. Unable to open the window, he threw the chair through the window with all of his might and ripped off the blanket from the nearest bed. The second he heard it land he heard both angry groups meet in the hallway. Their volume significantly increased.

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

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

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

"Come back!"

"You fiend! Bring it back!"

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

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



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

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

One of the crewmen showed him to an open bunk. There he settled in, nodding his thanks to the man as he walked away. Thankfully the men were all working up top, so he had a few solitary minutes to carefully wrap his gold nugget in a cloth and tuck it in a pouch he hung from his neck under his shirt. He'd considered hiding it in a boot, but he had too many things hiding in them for

comfort already. John could not wait to take his vacation. He had mapped out an out-of-the-way island that seemed nice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John figured a girl might appreciate it if he wore clean clothes. Despite that, he preferred to wear clean under shorts. So, John did his laundry.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER

TWO

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

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

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

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

Both girls were pretty, but their looks were night and day in contrast. Kellie had dark looks of brown, naturally luscious curls with matching cocoa eyes. Kellie had a more serious-reserved air to her countenance. Hannah had golden stick-straight blonde hair that fought even the

most expensive curling iron and bright blue laughing eyes, but Hannah convinced Kellie to take the time to straighten her hair since she herself took the painstakingly long time to curl her own hair. For the occasion of the charity event, Hannah had decided that the two friends would exchange hairstyles for the night. Both were slim and trim thanks to many trips to the local gym, but Kellie was on the short side where Hannah was tall like a model. Kellie often envied her friend's looks in secret.

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

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

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

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

Hannah full-on glared at Kellie. Kellie only spared her a glance before turning her attention to the man that had been addressing her friend in such an authoritative manner. He definitely was not their boss or even their supervisor. This man was pretty short with a ramrod straight posture trying to compensate for the lack of height. This did nothing to take away from his air of authority and intimidation. He had reddish-brown hair and grey eyes that bore into the unfortunate girls. His mouth sneered at them in a botox frozen smirk. His eyelids were lazy, but his eyes held a disturbing excited, almost arrogant, glint. The three men standing around them, that had bumped into her, were all about the same height – tall – and henchmen

looking with stoic expressions permanently plastered on their faces. Kellie had never seen any of these men before tonight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

last note that her mother had read to little Kellie the next morning. The note held empty reassuring words with a heavy dose of sorrow filling in between the lines. Mr. Yassiff was presumed dead some years later. Who was the man Ben spoke of?

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

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

"No! Don't! They have guns! They. Will. Kill. You." Fear radiated from the blonde.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mickey, your shirt!" Someone who luckily was wearing two shirts shed one and tossed it to the one who spoke. "You, give her your hat. I'm Duncan." The spokesman introduced himself. "Here, sweetheart, put these on." Duncan slid the shirt over her head, and Kellie stuck her arms through the sleeves. Duncan tightened the baseball hat on her head. "Let's play some

ball.” He grinned down at her. Kellie tried to smile back at him. All the guys resumed their game again. They strategically kept her surrounded and included in the game.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where am I?”

“Don’t you know?” Duncan frowned.

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

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

“Kellie.”

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

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

“My home.” Duncan said bashfully.

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



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

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

Kellie leisurely dressed and gathered her pajamas together in a neat pile replacing the clothes on the chair that she was now wearing. Quietly Kellie opened the door to the room she was staying in. Slipping out she closed it securely behind her. She stole down the hallway and down the stairs following the heavenly smell and sounds toward what she assumed to be the kitchen. Peaking around the last corner she found a soft, cheery woman carrying on in the kitchen. She sashayed here and there happily doing her thing while unknowingly being watched. The woman had black as night hair and rosy smiling cheeks. Her humming was sweet and calming. The woman was neither large nor small. She was quick to smile even by herself.

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

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

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

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

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

Kellie blushed.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl lay strapped to an examination table while Dr. Yassiff pulled a fearfully large needle from her arm. Jack sprinted to her side just as she released another scream. Her long auburn hair was splayed all around her head while her face was flushed and scrunched in great pain. Sweat beaded her forehead. She was lean with a layer a softness that was miraculously maintained. Even through the intense treatment she likely has undergone just like Jack had undergone - the girl managed to hold on to a softness that graced her countenance, not just her physique.

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

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

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

“Do something!” Jack demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

With that simple statement, the tired-sounding doctor slipped an enormous needle in Jack’s arm. The second the doctor began to slowly push the foreign substance into his bloodstream, Jack realized a pain so great that he would never forget it. Jack understood the girl’s need to

scream. Jack hollered in agony for all he was worth. He felt as though it would never end. Finally the needle was removed, but the pain remained.

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

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

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

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

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

“Jack” his voice cracked.

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

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

Stephanie whispered. “Are you alright?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, Dr. Yassiff turned toward them trailing the tray on wheels carrying the instruments of the trade he had collected. The doctor proceeded to take their vitals and give them an overall checkup. When he finished, he scribbled his signature on their forms with a flourish. Putting everything away, Yassiff ensured their restraints were secure once more, and he and the goons disappeared again without another word. Alone, Jack and Stephanie stared at each other in bewilderment. Jack’s brow furrowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Muscle men?” Stephanie suggested with a shy giggle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack flipped his sight to gold momentarily, out of curiosity. This confirmed his suspicions nearly making him blind from the mighty glow from the all of the others filling the room. Everyone in this section of the compound had been injected with the serum. This plan

(whatever it was) had been in operation for a long time. So much longer than the seven years he had been cooped up in there.

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

> END OF SNEAK PEEK <

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Thanks for reading!!! – *Kay Bowser*