

The Most Hostile Planet

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The Most Hostile Planet

by [Kingtide](#)

Summary

In the final story in this series, Dr. Smith and Penny have returned to Earth to try to find Will. But is everything as it seems?

Will is still trying to remember who he is, and continues to dream about the things that might have happened or might yet happen.

And Dr. Smith gets an origin story.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“I sang until my homeland threw a noose around my neck. That’s when I caught my breath.”
- Laysat Baysarova

“Pick it up Will,” Penny demanded. The bracelet had slid off her wrist. Actually, she had tilted her arm at an angle allowing it to slide off and drop to the sand.

She was standing in front of her brother, who was inside an electrical barrier. He had been picking up rocks all day. His white t-shirt was dirty, and sweat glistened from his brow. Their father and Don were off trying to reason with Niolani, who had enslaved the males. All except for Smith, who the woman seemed to have taken a liking to. But if there was one thing Smith was good at, it was manipulation. Penny had decided to use this time to torment her brother a little. Besides, she didn’t see anything wrong with females being the dominate sex for a change. And if Niolani could be trusted, that’s the way it was on her planet.

“What? You’re giving me orders now too?” Will said.

“Yes. You have to do as I say. Females are everything, males are nothing.”

“What’s wrong with you Penny?” He asked.

“Stop arguing with me and do as I say!”

“You know I’m your brother?”

“So what? If Niolani gets her way, you’re still going to have to do what I say, even if you are my brother.”

“You know I would never make you do that, right?” He said.

For just a second, she started to feel guilty. She brushed it away. “Do what you’re told Will Robinson!”

Will looked at her for a few seconds, then bent over and picked up the bracelet. She stretched out her arm and he put it on her wrist. She smirked at him. “Good. I’ll see if I can get them to give you extra rations.”

“Don’t bother,” He answered, turning away from her.

“Will...” She was feeling guilty again.

He stopped and turned to her. “What?”

She caught herself. “Nothing. There are a lot of rocks over there. You better get started.”

He didn't say anything. Just walked over to the rock pile.

She started to call his name again. Tell him she was just joking. But she stopped herself. She turned and walked off.

Her memory-dream changed. She was no longer on the planet, she was sitting at the table in the galley with Judy. Will had just walked away angry. She and Judy were laughing at him. She couldn't remember what had happened but he wanted to play chess and she wasn't in the mood for it. Sometimes he was just so childish.

And she was no longer there. She was at the console of the Jupiter 2, watching the monitor as the screen grew dark. "Will, get out of there!" She called to her brother on the radio.

"I almost have it," He called back. "Keep watching the screen."

"No Will! I think you need to leave now."

He ignored her and stayed under the weather station.

Her mother and father and Don ran up the ramp and on to the flight deck. "I think Will's going to get caught in the storm!" She called to them.

Then she was no longer on the bridge, she was hurrying into her coat to join her mother and Dr. Smith outside the ship when Don and her father had pulled up in the Chariot. They had gone to the cave to find Judy and Will after the ice storm, only to find the cave empty. They had called the Jupiter 2 and told them they were exploring the cave, trying to find where Judy and Will had gone.

Now it was the next day, and they were back.

When they were outside, Penny looked in the back of the Chariot. Will was asleep on Judy's shoulder, and her sister was gently pushing him, telling him it was time to wake up.

When Judy and Will climbed out of the Chariot, Maureen hugged Will while Penny hugged Judy. She let go of Judy then stepped to her brother and put her arms around him. "Will I was so scared for you when I saw the storm coming in. I'm so glad you're safe."

He hugged her back and said, "Thanks Penny."

"What happened to you?" She asked.

"Nothing, we just got lost for a while. I'm really tired. I think I want to go to sleep for a couple of hours."

"Okay Will," Maureen said, "That's probably a good idea."

Will turned and walked inside, leaving the others standing there, watching him go.

"I need to get out of the cold and get a hot cup of tea before I catch my death," Dr. Smith huffed and walked inside.

The others joined him. Penny followed Judy down to her room, and called to her before she closed her door. "Hey, Judy."

Her sister turned around. "What happened to you?" Penny asked. "Will's acting strange."

Judy paused. "It was just scary for him I think. The storm and all. He'll be okay." She closed the door behind her.

Penny knew her sister was lying, or at least hiding something. And she sounded weird herself. Something had happened to them both. She looked at Will's door, thought about knocking, then decided against it. She sighed, walked away.

Suddenly, she heard him knocking. She was on her bed now, trying to ignore him. But it wasn't her bed in her cabin. She wasn't on the Jupiter 2. She was home, on Earth. "Penny, can I come in?" He called.

"Go away Will. I don't want to talk to anyone right now," She answered.

"Please?"

She sighed, got off the bed, walked to the door, unlocked it, then went back and laid down without opening it.

Will walked in, closing the door behind him.

His sister was lying down, looking up at the ceiling.

Will walked over and sat down beside her on the bed. "What's wrong?" He asked.

"*Nothing Will,*" She said, sounding exasperated.

"You know that's not true. You've been like this for days."

"Like what?" She asked. She still wasn't looking at him.

"Not talking to anyone. Mad all the time."

"How would you know? No one notices anything around here. Why would you?"

"Mom and Dad and Judy are busy Penny, if that's what you mean. Getting ready to go. They don't mean to ignore you."

"I don't care if they are busy. I don't care if they ignore me. I want them to ignore me. You know what else I want? I want *you* to ignore me. Why can't you be like them?"

"Because I can see how you are. And I know something's wrong."

"You wouldn't understand anyway. You're just all excited about going to space."

"*Of course* I'm excited about going to space," Will answered. "We are the first family in space. No one has ever done what we're going to do. The first people in the world to colonize

another planet? Who wouldn't be excited about that?"

"Me, that's who."

"But why not?"

"If you have to ask, then you're just proving me right. You wouldn't understand."

"Then tell me," He answered. "I *might* understand."

She finally looked at him. "Okay. Everything I know is here. My home is here. My friends are here. And we're leaving it all behind. We are going to a whole different planet. Where there is no one else. They don't even know when the next family will go to Alpha Centauri. It will just be us. Me and you and Judy and Mom and Dad. And the pilot."

"Don," Will said.

"Whatever. We've met him one time, and now he's part of our family? So we are going to live our whole lives with no friends. No other people. Just us."

"We don't know that, Penny. If we are successful they'll start sending other colonists. And maybe there are people from other planets we'll meet. That's the best part. Don't you see? Discovering what's out there. Exploring a whole new world. Doing something with our lives besides just going to school every day like all our friends. It's going to be great."

"What do you know about it?" She answered. "Of course you're excited about going. You don't even *have* friends."

She regretted it as soon as she said it. She watched his face fall. "You're right Penny. I don't have any friends." He stood up and walked away.

"Will," she called. But he left and closed the door behind him.

She looked back up at the ceiling. She felt so guilty. He was just trying to be nice. And he was concerned about her. He had been noticing her mood for days, while everyone else just seemed to be oblivious, as they were all getting ready to go to space in three weeks. He asked her all the time if she was okay, and she just brushed him off. Now she deliberately hurt him, for no reason other than she was angry and sad and wanted to take it out on her little brother.

She stood and left the room and walked down the hall. She knocked on his door, called his name a couple of times, and when he didn't answer, she pushed the door open and went in. Will was lying on his bed face down, turned away from the door. She sat beside him and put a hand on his back. "Will I'm sorry. That wasn't nice. I didn't mean it."

"Yes you did," he said. "You're right. I don't have any friends. Why would I care about leaving here?"

"But I'm your friend, Will. And I shouldn't have said that. And I shouldn't have treated you that way. Especially since you were just worried about me."

When he didn't answer she said, "Will you look at me, please?"

Finally he turned over and looked up at his sister. "Will, it's just, I'm not into science like you are. And, of course I'm excited about going to space. I mean, who wouldn't be? But it's forever, you know? We will never see home again. Never see our friends again."

"You mean *you* will never see *your* friends again," He responded. Then she knew how much her words had hurt him. Because the truth was, he didn't have any friends. He was always the smartest kid in school and the rest of them seemed to resent him for it. When they were younger it didn't matter as much, because the two of them were always together. But as she got older, Penny was much more social and was well liked at school, and she was always gone, it seemed. She hadn't given that a lot of thought until now. She would come home and find him playing a video game or working on a model or something. Almost always by himself. *Of course* it was going to be easier for him to leave. But that was no reason to be mean to him.

"Will, I apologize for hurting you," She said. "It was mean. I wish I hadn't said it."

"Thanks Penny. It's okay though. But, I do know how you feel. In California, at least Jeremy was there." Jeremy lived in the neighborhood and had been Will's best friend since before Kindergarten, and was as much of a science nerd as Will. But then the Robinsons left for Florida when their parents began training for the Alpha Mission. "I know it won't be easy for you to leave everyone behind. But, I'll always be your friend. Okay?"

She smiled at him. "I know," She said. "Do you think we'll ever come home, Will?"

He looked at her for a minute before answering. "I guess no one knows for sure, Penny. No one has ever done this before."

She knew he was lying to try and make her feel better. They would never be home again. They both knew it. But the fact that he wasn't willing to say that made her love him so much in that moment.

"Well, if we don't, we'll still have each other. It's good...you know? That we have each other?"

"Yeah," he agreed.

Penny woke slowly from her dream. It was so weird. She couldn't tell if it was a series of dreams, or one dream about several things that had happened. They were all about Will. Actually the two of them. The dream made her remember that she wasn't very nice to him. Actually mean sometimes. But then she was dreaming of how he was with her. He was a good brother. No matter how she treated him. Even the bracelet that she had purposely dropped in the dirt to make him pick up. He had made her that bracelet out of diamonds he had found on a planet. She was feeling bad when her friend, an Alien or whatever he was,

Mr. Nobody, had disappeared. Will had thought she was making it all up, or imagining it. But he still made her the bracelet to try and cheer her up.

She guessed that she had had the dream because she felt guilty. About the way she had treated him, and how he had still decided to stay behind with her on the strange planet with the kids who never aged.

But she was awake now. Or was she? It was dark. So dark she began to panic, afraid she had gone blind. And she couldn't move. Something was happening. Then there was a noise she didn't recognize, close to her face. She started to scream, but her voice didn't work. She saw a glimmer of light. Maybe she wasn't blind. As her eyes began to focus, she realized there were faces surrounding her. Leaning close. People were talking in a foreign language. She tried to speak to them but couldn't get the words out. She passed out.

She slowly opened her eyes again. The faces were still there, leaning close to her. She didn't recognize them. But she noticed the top of the small ship she was in and knew now what had happened. She had tried to go back to Earth through the wormhole. Her and Dr. Smith. Did it work? She couldn't tell. The faces were human. Light skinned, and the men had thick, bushy beards. They were dressed in warm weather clothes with fur hats. She tried to speak but the words still didn't come.

One of the men spoke to her, but she couldn't understand the language. A face grew closer. This one she recognized.

"Child, are you alright?" Dr. Smith said. He was leaning over her. Someone had given him a cloak made of fur, and it was wrapped around him. He had on one of the fur hats that the other men were wearing. "Penny, dear. Can you talk?"

"I..." She tried but that was all she could say.

Smith turned to one of the men who was next to him and spoke to him in the same foreign language. Smith could speak their language, she thought. How?

He turned back to her. "We are safe, Penny. We came through the wormhole and landed back on Earth. These people are friends. Acquaintances really, but willing to help us. But we must leave. We are not safe here. They will conceal the vessel the best they can, but we must be away from it as quickly as possible. They are going to help you to your feet."

She felt the men put their hands under her arms and back, and begin to pull her from the containment device she had been enclosed in. They helped her to her feet and steadied her.

"Can you stand, Penny?" Dr. Smith asked.

She tried again to speak. When she couldn't she just nodded.

One of the men said something and Smith said, “We must leave now. They think we have been spotted. We’ll speak when we can.”

They helped Penny to the hatch, where the steps led to the rocky surface. She stumbled once, but one of the men caught her. She stood and looked around. They could have been on the barren surface of many of the planets she and her family had landed on. There were mountains surrounding them, with snowy peaks in the distance. They seemed to have landed in a small valley. And several meters in the distance she could see a forest. It was a cold, gloomy day. One of the men brought her a blanket and wrapped it around her, and another put a fur hat on her head.

One of the men held an arm to steady her, and Dr. Smith held her other arm. She still wanted to ask him questions, but she didn’t think she could talk. And she was light headed.

Two other men and a woman appeared now, one of the men leading a string of small horses. “Can you ride?” Dr. Smith asked. When she just stared back at him, he turned to one of the men and said something. The man took one of the horses by the reins and climbed up, then he reached a hand down to Penny. She looked at Dr. Smith.

“You can trust him,” he said. “They are getting us out of here.”

She gave the man his hand and he pulled her up. She sat behind him. The man said something to her. Dr. Smith said, “hold on to him. We’re going through the mountains. They are excellent horsemen, but we will move quickly, and you’re still weak.”

Dr. Smith seemed different somehow. Even his voice. He didn’t seem as frantic. Every word exaggerated. He seemed...almost normal. She watched as a man handed Smith the reins of a horse and he pulled himself into the saddle like he was born to it, making Penny wonder once again who he really was.

There were seven of the mysterious horse riders. Three women and four men, including the man that Penny was holding on to. They were all armed with rifles flung over their shoulders and the horses had full packs. And Dr. Smith was correct, they were all excellent riders, and the small horses seemed well accustomed to the terrain. They covered the ground quickly, moving toward the mountains.

After several minutes, one of the men raised his hand and stopped and the other riders followed suit. The leader had taken a pair of binoculars off his saddle and was looking to the sky. He barked an order, flung the binoculars over the saddle again and kicked his mount into a gallop.

“Hold on Penny,” Smith called to her. Her horse lunged forward as her rider kicked the animal. Then they were all galloping toward the far forest.

Chapter 2

“This is Paula Zahn, outside Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, which has been shut down for the last two days as the FBI investigates an apparent double homicide that occurred during a private event on Friday night.

“The theme park closed at five pm Friday to host the event, which began at seven pm and was scheduled to run until midnight. But sources report that shortly before midnight, the power grid crashed and auxiliary power was slow to come on line, leaving the entire park in total darkness.

“It was then that the homicides were believed to have occurred. And in a strange twist, we have spoken to witnesses who report that Will Robinson, the youngest child of the Robinson Family, of the Jupiter 2 Mission to Alpha Centauri, known as the first family in space, was present for the event.”

A photo of Will Robinson appeared on the screen.

“The Alpha Centauri mission included Professor John Robinson and Dr. Maureen Robinson, Will Robinson’s parents, Judy and Penny Robinson, his two sisters, and Major Don West, pilot for the Jupiter 2 Mission.”

A photo of the Robinson family and Don briefly appeared on the screen, then the live feed of the reporter reappeared.

“Almost six weeks ago, the Space Pod from the Jupiter 2 splashed down in the Pacific Ocean with Will Robinson on board. By all reports, he has been uncooperative with authorities, refusing to talk about what happened to his family or how he returned to Earth. And some are suspicious that he may have been the cause of his family’s disappearance.

“Standing by, we have two park employees, Sara McKee and Adrian Nelson, who claim to have seen Will Robinson at the park the night of the incident.”

The camera panned to the two teenagers standing next to two men in suits and a man with CNN on his shirt.

“Sara, can you tell us what you witnessed Friday night?” The reporter asked.

“Yes, we operate Space Mountain, me and Adrian,” She said, glancing at the boy beside her. “And earlier that night, Will Robinson and a girl got on the ride.”

“You’re sure it was Will Robinson?” The reporter asked.

“Yes,” both teenagers answered in unison. “Everyone knows Will Robinson,” the girl said. “I mean, we all knew what the Robinson’s looked like anyway, but he’s been on all the news since returning to Earth.”

“And he rode it three or four times,” the boy added. “Will Robinson and the girl. There was no one else here so they just asked to ride it again and again. It was definitely Will Robinson.”

“How did he seem?” The reporter asked.

“Seem?” The boy responded.

“Yes, did he seem upset or anything?” She asked.

“No, he was having fun. They both were. Like two kids at Disney with the whole park to themselves.”

“There were no other guests?” The reporter asked.

“No,” The girl responded. “We were told there was a private party. They do that sometimes, not very often. But when they do it’s like for a group of people. Corporate events. But the two kids were the only ones we saw all night.”

“Will Robinson and the girl?” The reporter asked, trying to clarify.

“Yes,” the teenagers answered.

“And you don’t know what happened to the two people who were shot?” The reporter asked.

“Well, someone said he shot them,” The boy answered.

“Who?” The reporter asked.

“Will Robinson,” The boy and girl replied at the same time.

Suddenly one of the men in suit and tie stepped between the teenagers and the reporter.

“That’s enough. No more questions.” He put his hands up to block the camera.

“Wait a minute,” The reporter said. “Can you confirm that Will Robinson is believed to have been the shooter?”

“That’s enough. No more questions.” Two other men were ushering the teenagers away.

The reporter turned back to the camera. “Well, in an apparent scoop, Will Robinson is believed to have been the shooter, at least by these two park employees. We will have to consult our sources and see if we can get more details.”

The news went world wide in minutes. The next evening the pressure had built, and the FBI held a press conference at their headquarters in Washington D.C.

The Spokesman was a veteran agent, tasked with press relations and well experienced. He approached the podium under the glare of television cameras and flashing lights. His statement was short and direct.

“On Friday night, at approximately eleven thirty pm, two United States Federal Agents were gunned down in cold blood. They were tasked with the protection and care of William Robinson, a member of the Robinson Family, from the Jupiter 2 mission to Alpha Centauri. The shooting occurred at The Magic Kingdom, a Walt Disney World Theme Park outside Orlando Florida. The shooting is under investigation. That is all the information I have for you at the moment.”

As soon as he stopped talking the questions came, dozens of reporters shouting over themselves. Finally the spokesman pointed to one reporter and the others grew quiet.

“Where is Will Robinson?” The man asked.

“He has been missing since Friday night,” the spokesman said.

The shouting started again. The spokesman pointed to a lady with a microphone and the others quieted again as she shouted into the mic. “Is Will Robinson a suspect?”

“We are operating on the assumption that he is somehow involved.”

“What about the girl?” Another reporter yelled over the others.

“There was a teenage girl with Will Robinson,” The spokesman said.

“Is she a suspect?” Someone yelled.

“No, we do not believe that she is involved. We are operating under the assumption that she is potentially a kidnap victim.”

“Do you have any idea where Will Robinson is?” A woman yelled.

He leaned over the podium. “We are looking into several leads that we are developing, and I have no more information for you at this time. But if anyone comes in contact with Will Robinson, we are asking that they do not try to apprehend him, but should contact local authorities immediately.”

“Is he armed and dangerous?” Someone shouted.

“Yes, until we have further information, Will Robinson should be considered armed and dangerous.”

At that the man turned and walked off, followed by the others standing near him as the press tossed questions at them.

Dr. Gaston turned off the television and faced her counterparts on the board. None of them were pleased.

"I'm having a hard time understanding the reasoning here," The Lieutenant said.

"We need to find the boy," Gaston replied. "The best way to do that is to make sure he can't be moved without the entire world looking for him."

"I'm concerned about the lack of judgement on your part," The Lieutenant answered. "This girl was your protégé. This trip to a theme park. How are you not responsible for this?"

"When did I say I wasn't responsible?" She answered. "I have no problem taking responsibility. And now I am going to fix it, but I need to get out of this damn meeting so I can." At that she walked out.

She climbed in a helicopter outside, and was back in her office in an hour. Her assistant, Agent Carmichael, was waiting for her in her office. "How did it go?" He asked.

"It doesn't matter. Those fools think they have some kind of control over me. But I have files on all of them."

"I'm sure they know that," He responded.

"I would hope so," She said. "Fuck them. Any word?"

"No. They completely disappeared."

"Who helped her?" She asked.

"Nothing on that either. We watched everything. She never met with anyone outside of the company. No electronic footprint. She just...vanished."

"Well, she didn't *just vanish*."

"Sure seems that way," Carmichael answered.

A week later there still had been no word of the whereabouts of Will Robinson or Mandra. Dr. Gaston was unbearable to be around, and Agent Carmichael was the only one who approached her. He had no choice, and did everything he could to avoid her. But this time when he rushed into her office he thought maybe she would want to hear the news.

Dr. Gaston looked up from her computer monitor. Carmichael had entered without knocking, which he never did. Mandra was the only other person who did that, and she did it just to

annoy the woman. Gaston stared at the man, waiting.

“Something else came through the wormhole,” he said.

She stood. “Something else? What do you mean?”

“They don’t know. A small ship.” He rushed to her desk, motioned to the keyboard in front of her. “May I?”

She slid away from the desk. He stood in front of her computer, began pressing the keys. Once he had what he was looking for, he picked up the remote and pressed it and the monitor on the wall powered on.

“Here it is. Visual from Endeavor.”

The entire Space Shuttle fleet was gathered around the wormhole, which just appeared as a void in the darkness, with no stars visible on the other side. There were six shuttles. All heavily armed, which other nations had suspected, though they had never been able to prove.

As Gaston and Carmichael watched the screen, a small object appeared in the center of the void, then sped past the gathered Shuttles, so fast none of them had time to react. The camera lost the image briefly, then regained it.

“That’s thirty times the speed of sound, but it made no noise at all, no sonic boom,” Carmichael said. “Now watch.”

Suddenly the object seemed to stop in midair, then change direction. “No human could survive the G force in that,” He said. “And there is no visible means of propulsion. No wings. No vapor trail. We’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We’ve seen things like it many times,” Gaston said. “Typical of most UFO sightings.”

“You think this is what we’ve been seeing?” He asked.

“Who knows? I assume they lost it.” Her mood wasn’t much better.

“They did, but they picked it up again. It landed.”

“What?” Now she walked back and sat at her desk. Carmichael stepped to the side and turned the key pad so he could enter more information. A visual of Earth appeared. He kept zooming until he was over Eastern Europe. He zoomed closer until they had a visual of a mountainous region located between the Caspian Sea to the East and the Black Sea to the West.

“I’ll be God Damned,” She said.

“You think it’s possible?” He asked.

“Possible? We just pulled a two hundred thousand year old corpse out of a grave in Texas. A corpse that looked like it was buried yesterday. Of a boy who never aged. If there’s one thing we’ve learned, it’s that anything’s possible. But would I have believed it? Never.”

“Now what?” He asked. “Is there any way to retrieve it?”

“Between the Chechens killing Russians, the Russians killing Chechens, Muslims killing Christians, Communists killing Capitalists, and these crazy mountain bastards killing everyone, I can’t see how.”

“Russia’s tracked it over their airspace, but so far we haven’t detected any movement to retrieve it,” He said.

“They don’t want to go in there anymore than we do,” She said.

“What do you think it means?”

“How the hell should I know? Six weeks ago an Einstein-Rosen bridge appears outside Earth’s atmosphere...something we considered a hypothetical until then. Fourteen year old Will Robinson comes through it on the Space Pod from the Jupiter 2, throwing riddles out like he’s on Batman, circa nineteen sixty six, hinting he’s been to a planet where children live forever. My fucking protégé, a fifteen year old girl, shoots our best assassin in the head and kidnaps the boy, threatening to barter him off to our friends or foes, whoever gives her the most money. Then a week later a UFO comes falling through said Einstein-Rosen bridge, and lands in one of the most inhospitable regions in the world. You ask me what it means? How the fuck should I know?”

“So, if we can’t retrieve it...it’s only a matter of time until the Russians do. It might be inhospitable, but it’s their back yard.”

“That’s why we’re going to blow it up.”

“You can’t be serious,” He said.

“I can’t?”

“It’s an alien...an advanced spacecraft. Can you imagine what we could learn from it?”

“If we could get it. But if we can’t get it, we damn sure aren’t going to let anyone else have it. Especially him.”

“Why is that so important?”

“You don’t know him. I do. He was dangerous before this. But if it’s really him, he’s been in space four years. By all accounts he’s been in contact with an advanced civilization. There’s no telling what he has learned.”

“And you think it’s him? That he survived?”

“Who else would land that damn thing where he landed it? It’s him alright. And he has a plan. I just don’t know what that plan is. But we’re not going to make it easy on him. Blow the goddamn thing, then find him.”

The horses galloped across the rocky hills until they were on the edge of the forest, then the leader pulled the reins, bringing his animal to a quick halt. He pivoted, the other riders taking his lead. They stayed at the edge of the forest, looking back at the small spaceship.

Dr. Smith rode his mount up beside Penny. "Are you okay child?" He asked.

"Yes," She managed to say. Her voice was barely a whisper. "What are we doing?"

Smith looked back at the small ship. "I'm afraid we..."

Before he could finish, something was streaking through the sky, then the Scout exploded. "No!" Penny cried, grabbing her throat from the pain. "No!"

Dr. Smith was close enough he could reach out and grab her arm. "Penny, we are alive. We must be thankful."

"Thankful?" She whispered. "I'm never going to see my family again, Doctor Smith. That was the only way back." She was sobbing now.

He kept his grip on her arm. "Penny dear, we must think of Will. We need to find your brother. Right now that's the most important thing."

Suddenly the sky filled with helicopters. "Russians," Doctor Smith said. He sounded calm, even though the helicopters were heading directly toward them. Penny saw why.

Four of the riders had dismounted and were pulling weapons out of the horses's backpacks. Within seconds, they were aiming RPG's at the helicopters. The rider Penny was with turned his horse away and kicked it, and they darted off into the trees, followed by Doctor Smith and the other riders who had not dismounted. Penny heard the explosions behind her.

Chapter 3

“Move!” Penny shoved Will from behind every time he tried to pull away. It wasn’t really Penny. But it looked just like her. And the man who looked like his father kept a tight grip on his arm.

“Let me go! I want to be with my family!” He shouted, fighting them every step of the way.

Finally the man grabbed him by the back of the hair and started dragging him. He gripped the man’s wrist with both his hands, trying to relieve the pressure. “Stop it! Let me go.”

The man threw him to the ground. Will cowered, tried to crawl backwards to escape the furious man. The man turned to the girl who looked like Penny. “Go back and tell him to lower his sister into the fire. The blond one. Slowly.”

“No!” Will shouted. “Don’t touch my sister! Leave my family alone!”

“Its your choice,” The man said. “Either you get up and walk and stop fighting us, or that’s what we’re going to do. One family member at a time. Starting with your sisters.”

“Okay! I’ll do it. Just leave my family alone.”

The man reached down and grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. “Then walk!” He shoved Will ahead of him. The boy didn’t fight anymore. He had no choice.

The ground started moving. He opened his eyes. It wasn’t the ground. It was the bed he was on that was moving. Will looked around. He was in a small room. And the room was rocking. He realized he was in the cabin of a boat. He sat up and saw his ankle was chained to the bed. The chain was long, and across the room was a door. He could see a sink, and knew the chain was long enough to allow him access to the bathroom. That’s something, I guess, he thought.

He tried to recall his dream. He had been able to remember his family when Mandra took him to the theme park. And now it seemed like he had forgotten them again. He remembered the park and he remembered Mandra shooting the two agents and them fleeing in the car, but that was it. She had gotten him away from his captors, but now he was chained to this room. By Mandra, he assumed. He had a headache and his neck was sore. He felt it. It was swollen.

He didn’t know what to think now. Mandra was his only friend. But it looked like she had betrayed him too. He had a family somewhere, if they were still alive, but he couldn’t remember them anymore. And he had no idea what was going to happen to him. He was sad, thinking that he couldn’t trust anyone. He started to shout for Mandra, to see what was going on, but he decided against it. He would just wait until she showed up. Or someone did.

He closed his eyes again and thought about what had happened. Since waking up on Earth, nothing had seemed right. He didn't know who he was or why he was here. He just had to accept what he was told. But then his friendship with Mandra made everything better. Now... he had no idea what was going on. He drifted back to sleep after awhile.

"Will?" He opened his eyes. Mandra was there at the door. He could see daylight behind her, and a short stair case. The boat was rocking back and forth. He just stared back at her without answering.

"Are you hungry?"

"Why?" He asked.

"Why? You're a convenience, that's all. You helped me escape Gaston."

"What are you going to do with me?" He wasn't even angry. He was just resolved that he had no choice over whatever happened to him.

"There are a lot of people who want you," She answered.

"For what?"

"You have been to space and returned. You're the only human on Earth who can say that. A lot of people want to know what you know."

"Even if I've forgotten everything?" He asked.

"You remembered your family. When we were at the tree house."

She had walked further in his room now, and was standing near the bed.

"But you did something to me, didn't you?" Will asked. "I was in the car, then I woke up here. I don't even know how long ago that was. But my neck is hurt and it's swollen."

"That'll go away. There won't be a lasting effect."

"So you injected me. Knocked me out."

"I did. I wanted to get you away and I didn't want you to know where we were going. But, you don't remember your family now?"

"No. I was dreaming about them again, I think."

"Then you will again. And that's why you're valuable. You said there were kids who never aged. Once that information is out there, everyone will want you. I mean, who wouldn't want to live forever?"

"I wouldn't," He said.

His voice made her feel guilty again, but she ignored it.

“I remember that the kids were trying to find a way to be normal,” He said. “Like they had outlived everyone important to them and they hated it. They couldn’t have children. They couldn’t have any kind of normal life. Like me, I guess. And like you. If you didn’t lie to me about that too.”

She sat down in the only chair in the room. “I didn’t lie to you Will. There has been nothing normal about my life. And that’s what I want too. Gaston has taught me how to lie, how to kill. She made me her weapon. She controlled everything. Even the people I lived with. They called themselves my parents, but they worked for her.”

“That woman you killed. She murdered your mother?”

“Yes. As I grew older, things just didn’t seem right. I didn’t go to school. I had no friends. The only people in my life seemed to work for Gaston. But this is the Information Age. So I learned how to acquire information. And...I learned how to hack their systems. My parents didn’t hide things very well from me.

“That woman—the one I killed—her name was Kariina Bieve. She was a Chechen assassin. Gaston recruited her about a year before my mother died. My mother didn’t trust Gaston, and Gaston knew it. I believe that Kariina Bieve was recruited to kill my mother and replace her—though I wasn’t sure until she admitted it.”

“Replace her? So your mother was an assassin?”

“Yes.”

Will didn’t know how to respond to this, so he just remained quiet.

“That’s why I didn’t kill Bieve at first. If she hadn’t admitted it, I would have let her live.”

“Why are you lying to me still Mandra? You have me chained up. Even if you didn’t, I couldn’t overpower you, could I?”

“No, Will. You couldn’t. You—are a nice boy. I’m not a nice girl.”

“Then stop lying to me. You shot the other guy in the back of the head. You would have killed her anyway.”

Mandra was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, “Yes. I would have killed her anyway. I’m going to kill everyone I can until I get to Gaston.”

“Will that help? Your mother was an assassin. *They* are assassins. Now you are too. Do you think avenging your mother will change anything? It seems like this was all part of her life.”

“Don’t speak about my mother Will! You didn’t know her!”

“Did you?” He asked.

She stared back at him silently, but he saw the anger on her face. And maybe something else. Maybe an acknowledgment of what he said.

“Mandra, I don’t think you’re this person. You were kind to me. The only one I’ve met who was.”

“It was a role I was playing Will. I needed you.”

“I don’t believe that. I mean, yeah, it was a plan. And you do need me I guess, to carry it out. But there were times you were honest. And at the park you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it. Enjoy being a child for the first time. And just before the lights went out, you said you needed to tell me something. I think you had changed your mind. You weren’t going to do this. Or at least you were going to tell me the truth.”

She stood. “See, this is why you will never survive. I don’t know how you survived for so long in space. You are naïve. You think there is good in the world. Good in people. But there isn’t. I bet this family of yours has a ton of secrets that you don’t know about. You need to wake up and see the world around you, Will.”

“I did wake up. I saw the world around me. And it was bad. I was surrounded by doctors and nurses and people who looked at me like I was in a zoo. Then Dr. Gaston came in and told me about my parents—my family—and that I needed to tell her everything I knew. I was taken from one place to another and people were calling me a murderer. Gaston threatened to have me put in prison, and she was hinting that she was going to torture me.

“This is the world I woke up to. And then I met you. And you were kind to me. In this horrible place, surrounded by strangers, you were my friend. So that’s why I haven’t given up on everything. That’s why I have hope.”

“And that’s why you are so naïve Will. Because I was never your friend.”

She stormed out and Will heard the door lock. But he thought what made her so angry was that he was more correct than she wanted to admit.

Chapter 4

Penny held tight to the man in front of her as they made their way through the forest. The remaining helicopters had turned and fled when two of them had been shot down. Penny was quiet. She was confused about everything. Where they were, who these people were, and where they were going. She had tried to talk to Dr. Smith when he brought his horse up along side her's but he just said, "I will explain in due time my dear. For now, we need to get to a safe place."

She had been watching Dr. Smith closely. He was fluent in whatever language these people spoke. She thought it was Russian, and they said the helicopters were Russian, so she knew they were in that part of that world. Figures, she thought to herself. She had wanted to return to Earth almost since she had left for space, and when she finally did, this place was as strange to her as most of the planets they had landed on.

They traveled through the forest for the rest of the day, until they finally came to a small clearing. Everyone dismounted, and the riders began taking sleeping bags out of the packs on the horses and making camp. Dr. Smith approached her. "We will spend the night here Penny. We are safe here. Tomorrow we will travel in the mountains again."

She found a log and sat down on it and he sat beside her. "Where are we Doctor Smith? Is this Russia?"

"The Russians say it is. Let us not talk of it for now. I will explain it all in time."

"But who are these people?" She asked.

"They are friends of mine. When I gave the coordinates to Edgar, this is where I asked him to send the ship. The boy did a very good job."

"Why here?"

"Because this part of the world is in turmoil. It has been for years. I knew there was a better chance of us surviving and the Scout being hidden here than anywhere else."

"But when you gave them coordinates for the Pod, it was in the ocean."

"Yes. That was different. I didn't care who found me. I just wanted to return to Earth. And the United States is home to me. Not here. Though I have been here many times. I wanted the Pod to be discovered by someone from the United States, and apparently it was. That's where your brother is. But I didn't care about preserving the Pod. I had no intentions of ever returning to space, child. But I wanted you to be able to."

She was quiet and Dr. Smith looked at her face and saw tears had formed. He put an arm around her.

She leaned against him and started crying. After awhile she said, "I'll never see my family again Doctor Smith. Mom and Dad. Judy. I'll never see them."

"There, there child. There, there. No one knows what the future will bring, but the most important thing is to find Will and get him away from the people who have him. Then we will see what the next step is."

She was still leaning against him. He was so different than she ever thought he was, and she felt comforted by him. By his strength, which was the most surprising thing to her. Her father was the strongest man she had ever met. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. A born leader, but a great and caring father. Don was strong in his own way, but he always let his emotions get the best of him. But Dr. Smith seemed different than either of them. Strong like her father in many ways, something she had begun to notice on the planet with the children. But there was something else in him. Something cold and calculating that gave him a strength even her father didn't have. It made him seem dangerous, and she was glad he was on her side. She would hate to be his enemy.

"Who has Will, Doctor Smith? You said something like that before. Isn't it just the government? Wouldn't he be safe?"

"Safe? They won't want any harm to come to him. He's very valuable to them. But that doesn't make him safe. I do not trust any government. In my experience, the only thing government wants is power. And once they have that, the only thing they want is to hold on to it. No, child. As long as they have your brother, he will never really be safe. When we get him away from them, I will make sure he is safe. And you too."

She raised up and looked at him. "Why Doctor Smith? We are back on Earth. You obviously have friends here. And I know now you are not the person we always thought you were. You could just disappear and take care of yourself, couldn't you?"

He looked at her for a second. "Yes, my dear. Yes, I could."

"Then why don't you? Why risk your life for us?"

"*Why*, Child? Because I promised your parents I would. I promised you I would. And you are my family. You are all I have."

She hugged him again.

The next day they left the forest and were in the mountains once again. They saw no other people, but from some of the higher peaks, Penny could see small villages in the valley's below. They crossed over a snowy peak late in the afternoon, and they pulled the horses to a stop and looked down into a valley. There was a river and a town beside it.

“That is the Sunzha river,” Doctor Smith said, riding up beside her. “The town is Galashki. That is our destination. I have...friends...there.”

Penny glanced at him. There was something he was leaving out.

“There may be information on your brother there,” He added.

“Here? Why here? He’s on the other side of the world.”

“True, but my friends here have sources. And they can help us get to the other side of the world.”

One of the women pulled a radio out of her pack and spoke into it. Someone answered her back. The woman put the radio away and said something to Dr. Smith. They began riding over the hill and Penny saw there was a trail leading down.

“The coast is clear,” Doctor Smith explained. “There has been no patrols for several weeks here.”

“Patrols of who?” Penny asked, still trying to figure out what was going on.

“Russian regular army. The Chechens. And MVD has stayed away since last year.”

“What’s MVD?” Penny asked.

“Russian Paramilitary force. They were ambushed here last year, according to the man you are riding with. Forty Russians were killed and their convoy was destroyed.”

“By who?” Penny asked.

“We have been riding with some of them, child. Some others are waiting for us in the village.”

Penny looked around at the rugged people they were with, “Doctor Smith, something tells me we are less safe here than a lot of the places we saw in space.”

“How astute of you my dear,” he said, glancing at her. “After four years in space, I am not exaggerating a single iota when I say that Earth is the most hostile planet in the universe.”

It was almost dark when they were out of the mountains. They rode the horses to a farm that was a few kilometers outside the village. They were greeted by a man and woman and two teenage boys who took the horses from them. Two of the men went inside a large barn and when they came out one of them was driving an old pick up truck and the other was driving a beat up old car.

They split up into two groups, with Penny and Dr. Smith climbing into the back of the car. After twenty minutes they were on the road, leading into the village. Penny looked out the window. Most of the cars they passed were old, as were many of the buildings and store fronts. It was cold, but there were still quite a few people on the street of the small town. Most of the men seemed to be dressed as the people they had been traveling with. Black beards and fur hats with thick coats.

They turned off a main road and the car pulled up to an old, two story house. Penny noticed the truck with the others in their party parked across the street, and the people got out but remained by the vehicle, leaning against it. Waiting.

Dr. Smith and Penny followed the driver of their car up the sidewalk to the house. As they approached the door, it opened and an old woman walked out. She looked past the man who led them to the door, and stood staring at Dr. Smith. Smith stared back at her. Penny watched this, trying to read his emotions. Finally the old woman's expression changed, and what appeared on her face could almost be called a smile. But not quite. She said something to Dr. Smith, and he answered her. The two of them embraced quickly, then she turned and walked into the house. Smith looked at Penny. "Come on child." They followed her in.

There were several other men in the house when they entered. They looked like the people they had been traveling with. All of them carried rifles.

The old woman led them to a room in the back of the house where a few other men and women were sitting. The woman pulled out a chair and Smith sat on an old sofa and motioned for Penny to sit beside him.

Smith spoke to the old woman. She said a few words back, then some of the others joined in the conversation. Penny just sat and watched for a while, then finally she said, "Doctor Smith, can you please tell me what's going on?"

"Shortly child. Once we leave."

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"Away. As fast as we can. It is not safe here. They know this house well and will come here looking for us."

"Why?" She asked.

"They tracked the Scout when it came through the wormhole. That's what concerned me."

"The Russians? But they destroyed it," She said.

"No. The Russians tracked it over their airspace. They weren't sure what it was. And they were not the ones who destroyed it."

"Then who did?" She asked.

"The people who have young William."

“What’s going on Doctor Smith?”

There was a quick knock on the door, and a young man and woman entered. The others in the room stood up and greeted them.

Dr. Smith stood as well. “This is our ride, child. We’re leaving now.”

The old woman walked them to the door. Once outside, she said something to Dr. Smith again. He said something back and they embraced briefly, though this time, they seemed to hold it longer. When they stopped, they stood looking at each other for a few seconds. Then Smith glanced at Penny. “Let us be on our way, child.”

They turned and followed the young couple to a car that was parked in front. “Where Doctor Smith? Go where?”

“Home child. The good old U S of A.”

Chapter 5

When they were back at the Jupiter 2, Will saw the man who looked like Don and the girl who looked like Judy were outside the ship. There were bruises and marks on both of them.

“You made it?” Don said to the man who looked like his father.

“No thanks to you,” He answered.

“What are you talking about?” The man argued.

“I told him you were going to leave them,” The alternate Penny said, sneering at him.

The man looked back at the duplicate John. “I was. And you would have too.”

“Yes. The difference is, I would have gotten away with it.”

“What did you do to Doctor Smith?” Will demanded.

“He’s chained up in his cabin. I should have killed him. Now that we have you to fly the spaceship, I just might.”

“You better leave him alone if you want me to do anything!” Will said.

“I’ve had about enough of you,” his alternate father replied. “Get in there at the controls.”

“Not till I see Doctor Smith and know he’s okay!”

“Very well. Come on.” He shoved Will toward the hatch.

Will walked to the ladder, but his alternate father said, “Oh no you don’t. You’re going down on the elevator with us.”

Will stepped onto the elevator followed by the other John and Judy. “We’ll get ready to go,” the alternate Don said.

Once on the lower deck, Will saw the woman who looked like his mother was standing outside Smith’s door. “You got him,” She said.

To Will, this was the strangest part. Hearing this woman who looked exactly like his kind, loving mother sound like she was bitter and evil. And it looked like she had been in a fight. Her hair was messed up and there were bruises on her face.

“Yes, we got him. Let him in to see Smith, then we’re getting out of here.”

She stood aside and Will pushed the door open. Doctor Smith was lying in his bed, his hands chained together to the rail above him. He was bloody and bruised.

“Doctor Smith!” Will ran to his bed and the man opened his eyes. He smiled at the boy.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s merely a flesh wound,” Dr. Smith answered, amusing himself. “And I gave some back.”

“I noticed,” Will said.

“I was doing fine until your fake sister hit me from behind with a pipe wrench. I have a splitting headache my boy.”

Will turned to the others who were gathered around the door. “I need to get him some medicine.”

“You get nothing,” the alternate Don said. “We’re leaving now!”

“I’m doing what you want, but I need to get him something. He’s hurt.”

“Let him go,” His alternate father said. “Let the boy get him some medicine then take them both to the flight deck. If he doesn’t get us out of here we’ll kill Smith in front of him.”

The alternate Maureen walked over and released Smith’s cuffs and they fell off his wrists. Will helped him sit, then helped him to his feet. They walked out the door and to the galley, the others following. Will got some medicine from the first aid kit and handed it to Dr. Smith with a glass of water, then he took a hand towel out of a drawer and ran cool water on it from the sink and began wiping the blood off the man’s face.

“You are so kind my boy,” Smith said, smiling at him.

“That’s enough,” his alternate father said. “Let’s go. Now!” He grabbed Will by the arm and pulled him toward the elevator, while the alternate Don grabbed Smith.

The girl who looked like Judy walked up to them. “I guess all of that fighting didn’t make a bit of difference, did it?” she said to Will. She had bruises on her face as well. Will ignored her.

“The others are buckled in, ready to leave,” she said to the alternate John.

“Good, get back there and tell them we’re taking off.”

Once on the flight deck, he shoved Will into the pilot’s chair. “Do this. Now!”

“What about him?” The alternate Don said, still gripping Smith’s arm.

“I must be the co-pilot,” Smith said. “If there is a problem, I will need to assist.”

“No,” the alternate John said.

“So if the boy has problem with an engine, are you going to assist?” He snarled at the man, then looked at Will. “Remember our exit from Corellia, my boy?”

Will didn't know what he was talking about. Corellia was a planet in Star Wars. But he knew enough now to trust Doctor Smith's judgement.

"Yeah," he answered. "We almost didn't make it."

"The G force knocked Major West out, and an engine failed. If your father had not been co-piloting, the gravity would have pulled us back into the planet. It would have been the end of the Jupiter 2, and everyone in it."

"He's right," Will said.

The alternate Major West and John looked at each other. "Fine," John said. "But don't try anything stupid. We'll stand right behind you."

"Then you better hold on. Starting launch proceedings."

Will flipped two switches up and the mechanical voice said, "Initiating safety protocol. Prepare to launch."

Smith sat beside Will, looking to his right and left, as if he was nervous. He was fidgeting with his right hand. Drumming nervously with his fingers on the console.

"What's wrong Doctor Smith?" Will asked.

"I hate this part," the man answered. "That's why I'm always the first to buckle in downstairs."

Weird, Will thought. He seemed to be back to the old, frightened, Dr. Smith. And for some reason, he was lying. He had actually co-piloted several times when they left a planet. Don was always against it, but in John's mind, everyone needed to be able to pilot the ship in an emergency, even Dr. Smith. Suddenly, Will realized the man was up to something. He watched him closer. He was still glancing about nervously. Still drumming with his fingers.

"Countdown commencing," the mechanical voice announced. "Sixty seconds to launch. Fifty nine...fifty eight...fifty seven..."

What was Smith doing? Will concentrated on the man's fingers. Tapping over and over. First his index, then his second finger, then the middle finger, then back. And starting over again. The index...he had it. A quick tap with his index, two long taps, a quick tap. A pause. Then three long taps. A pause. Two quick taps. Then it started over.

Morse! Will finally understood. P, then an O, then a D. Pod! He was typing pod! Was Smith going to take the Pod? No. Now Will knew the man would never leave him here with them. He was telling Will to take the Pod. He glanced at Dr. Smith. The man looked at him and they both understood. He was telling Will to take the Pod and go back to the planet. Will wanted to argue with him. He didn't want to leave him behind, but he had learned enough about Dr. Smith to think he had a plan.

"Ten..nine...eight..."

“You better hold on,” Will said to the two men standing behind their chairs. The ship lifted off. It rose vertically, then Will guided it over the rocky planet below, gaining altitude as it ascended. He didn’t need to clear the atmosphere to use the Pod, but he needed to be well above the surface to launch it. He moved his arm slowly, flipped a switch, giving the control to Dr. Smith. Smith glanced at him acknowledging he now had control. Neither the alternate John or West seemed to be suspicious. But Will knew it was all they could do steady themselves as the Jupiter 2, gained speed.

Will couldn’t take his hand from the controls, but he needed to be ready to unbuckle when Smith made his move. He just didn’t know what the move was. But he quickly found out.

Just before leaving the planet’s atmosphere, Dr. Smith hit the reverse thrusters. Will felt his alternate father fall across his back. He reached down and unbuckled his seat belt. Smith hit forward thrusters and both the alternate Don and John were flung back. Will sprung from the seat and ran. He managed to get to the ladder and down to the second level, trying not to fall as the ship rocked. He looked up as his feet hit the lower deck, and saw the alternate John start his descent. He ran to the Pod, managing to close the door just before the man could grab him.

He felt the ship steady and knew that Dr. Smith was trying to make it easier for him to launch. He quickly pressed the launch control and the Pod’s engine powered on and the hatch opened, shooting the Pod out. He took the controls and guided the vessel back toward the surface, looking out the flight window and watching the Jupiter 2.

The ship began to reduce altitude. “What’s he doing?” Will wondered aloud. The descent was picking up speed until it disappeared over a mountain range.

Will picked up the mic. “Doctor Smith. Come in Doctor Smith!” There was no response. But Will was getting close to the surface and had to concentrate on landing. He knew the coordinates to their previous landing spot, but wanted to try and get close to the rift. He had to try and free his family. They had kept threatening to have the alternate Will kill them if he didn’t cooperate, but he didn’t know if they had any means of communicating with the boy.

He landed the Pod and saw that he had guessed correctly. Once he exited the small ship, the rift was only a few meters away. He started toward it, then heard an explosion and quickly turned behind him. There was smoke coming from the other side of the mountain range. The Jupiter 2 had crashed.

“Will, I brought you food.”

He opened his eyes. Mandra was there with a tray. “What’s wrong?” She asked him.

He could hear the concern in her voice. The girl was strange. “A bad dream I think. Or maybe it’s because I’m chained to my bed.”

“Can you remember the dream?” She asked, ignoring his comment.

“No.” He sat up.

She pulled the chair over by his bed and sat the tray on it in front of him. “Just soup and a sandwich,” she said. “Not some of the more fun stuff that I’ve been bringing to you. There’s nothing close, but I had supplies in the car.”

“Yeah, I guess your former friends are looking everywhere for you.” He tried to make his voice sound annoyed, but in truth, he didn’t feel that bad about everything. He didn’t remember his family, and he would much rather be here with Mandra than with Gaston and her people. He instinctively knew that the girl didn’t want to hurt him. She just...needed him. And he didn’t even really mind that. From what she had told him, he wanted her to escape Gaston. Even if it meant that she had to use him to do that. He decided to tell her.

“Mandra, you don’t have to force me to go with anyone,” he said. “I’ll do what you want.” He picked up the sandwich and took a bite. It was ham and cheese. It was good.

“What are you talking about?” She asked.

“Well, I don’t want you to have to stay with Dr. Gaston, after everything she’s done. And if you can get someone to give you a lot of money for me, then do it. I’ll go with them. I don’t think it would be as bad as Gaston anyway.”

“Even if it was an enemy of the United States?” She asked. She had sat down beside him on the bed. She wasn’t worried about him attacking her. She was pretty sure she could handle him. And she didn’t think he wanted to anyway. He just seemed...wounded. She quickly told herself not to feel sorry for him. “It’s your own country,” She added.

“Is it?” He asked. “I’ve been gone for four years, from what you all have told me. And as soon as I get back, I’m their prisoner and they are threatening to torture me and put me in jail. It’s hard to feel a lot of loyalty to them. I don’t think I have a country. Or a family anymore. I guess all I have is you. So if I can help you, why not?”

She looked at him for a few seconds, then she seemed to get angry. She stood. “Nice try Will! You think I’m going to unchain you, don’t you? I’m not stupid. That’s how Gaston underestimated me. She thought I was a child and that she was a lot smarter than I was. And that’s how I got away with it. So just stop trying! And I’m not your friend! You keep acting like we have some kind of connection. See? See how naïve you are? You think I’m your friend and look what I’m doing to you!” She walked toward the door.

“Mandra,” Will called. She stopped but didn’t turn back to him. “You *are* my friend. And I don’t care if you unchain me or not. I’m not going to go anywhere.”

“Jesus Will. You’re impossible!” She walked out and slammed the door behind her.

She stomped up the steps and walked out on the deck. The boat was small. Only twenty six feet. But she could handle a boat that size and that’s all that mattered to her. The craft was anchored in a shallow cove, far from prying eyes. There were mainly shallow waterways out

here, surrounded by tall grass. Back in the Cocaine Cowboy days in the Eighties, South American drug runners used to dump a lot of bodies here. She just needed a place to lie low until she had what she wanted. And what she wanted was a lot of money deposited in an off shore account.

The word was out and the numbers were getting ridiculous. She thought she might get fifty million for him. But she had to be careful. Her enemy list was growing. She had used a rouge terrorist organization to set up the escape from the theme park. She was supposed to deliver the boy to them the next morning and collect ten million. She assumed they would sell him to someone else. But the next morning she was long gone. She knew they were not the type of people to fuck with, but she was done doing what other people wanted.

And now this kid was offering himself up for her. “Jesus Christ,” she said, sitting down and looking up at the stars. “No one can be that goddamn good.” But maybe he was. There had been nothing about the boy that indicated he was anything other than a kind, sort of innocent teenager. As she looked up at the dark sky, she wondered what it had been like for him, spending almost a third of his life in space, with no one around but his family.

No wonder he had become so attached to her, she thought. He had just become a teenager. A time in his life when girls were going to be the thing he thought about the most. And he had been away from them. And she was his only friend. But he was never anything but respectful of her. And kind. “Goddamn it,” She said. She didn’t want to think about him being anything but a means to her freedom. But she couldn’t help herself. It was impossible not to like the boy.

Chapter 6

Penny had tried to ask Dr. Smith who the people were that had helped them, who the woman was, and where they were. But he had told her the less she knew the better. He said they had about five hundred miles to travel, which wasn't far, but that they had to cross a couple borders and that it was a very dangerous place in a very dangerous time. If anyone stopped them, he didn't want her to know anymore than was absolutely necessary.

The young couple knew what they were doing, and already had papers for Doctor Smith and Penny, which seemed almost impossible to the girl. At the borders she noticed that the man who was driving the car handed the papers over with an envelope. It seemed to be all they needed to make sure no one became too curious about who the passengers were.

The next evening they left the mountain road they had been traveling and arrived in a busy industrial city. "Where are we?" Penny asked.

"Poti. It's in Georgia." He looked at her. "Not *that* Georgia."

"Yeah, I can tell."

"We are taking a ship to Athens. It will take about five days. My friends will meet us there, and we will take a plane to the United States. Then we'll see about your brother."

"Do you think we'll find him?" She asked.

"Yes. I have made arrangements."

"Arrangements? How?"

"The message I sent through Edgar was for the coordinates of the Scout. And it worked because they found us. But I sent another message through Edgar several weeks ago. I didn't know that it was received until we were at the house with the old woman. She has connections. She got the word to my friends. She told me that the plan was in the process. If all goes well, when we get to the United States, you will be reunited with your brother."

"Who *are* you Doctor Smith?" She asked again.

"I'm your friend child. Your family. That's all you need to know for now."

She leaned over and hugged him again.

The ship they boarded was a cargo vessel. Doctor Smith seemed to have a lot of money with him now, which Penny assumed he had picked up at the house where the old woman was. They each had a small cabin, and shared meals with the crew. It was a Turkish ship, but most of the workers spoke some English. They were treated well, but one evening, a young sailor sat across from Penny and kept looking at her, then saying something to a man who was sitting beside him, then they both laughed. Dr. Smith had remained on deck after Penny had

come down to the galley. It was a beautiful evening and she had noticed that he had become quiet after their visit to the old woman. Penny wanted to ask him more questions about it, but she knew that he was not ready to discuss it with her.

When Smith walked into the galley and sat by Penny he noticed the two young men talking and laughing. He didn't say anything for a while, but the man across from Penny said something else and both men laughed loudly. Smith looked at them and said something quietly, while smiling. He spoke in Turkish, once again surprising Penny.

The young men stopped laughing, and the man across from Penny said something to Dr. Smith. Penny didn't know what it was, but she could tell it was an insult. Smith said something again in a very low voice.

Suddenly the man stood and lunged across the table at Dr. Smith. Penny screamed, but Smith stood from the table so fast Penny could not tell what he was doing. He had grabbed the man by his collar, driving him face first into the hard table top, then turning him so he was half way across the table, looking up. Smith had a small knife at his throat. He was still calm and still smiling.

One of the officers quickly walked over to the table, looked down at the sailor and said something to him, then glanced at Smith. The man's eyes grew wide. The young man said something to Smith, though this time it wasn't a curse.

Smith put the knife away and released the man, then calmly sat back down. He said a few words to the sailor again. The man looked at Penny and said, "My apologies," In a heavy accent. Then he looked at Smith. "My apologies...Doktor."

"All is forgiven," Smith said. Then repeated it in Turkish. The man quickly hurried from the room, followed by his friend.

Penny was staring at Doctor Smith. He didn't look at her, but said, "Eat child. Your food is getting cold."

When they arrived in Athens, they passed through customs quickly, using whatever paperwork and cash Dr. Smith was carrying. When they walked outside to the busy street leading from the port, Penny said, "Are your friends picking us up?"

"No child, we are getting a cab. They will meet us in two days."

"Why?" She asked. "It seemed like you timed everything else so perfectly."

"Have you ever been to Athens my dear?"

“No. I always wanted to see the Parthenon.” She had been back to Earth for over a week, but so far it had been a whirlwind of travel, mystery and danger. Though she had to admit, she was sort of enjoying all of it. She felt like she was living the life of an international spy.

“And that is why they are meeting us in two days, child. It *has* been timed perfectly.”

She smiled at him, then hugged him. He hugged her back then hailed a cab.

Dr. Smith gave the driver the name to a hotel in the old section of the city.

“You speak Greek too?” Penny asked him.

“Conversationally my child. Enough to get around.”

Penny didn’t believe him. “You’ve obviously been here before,” She said.

“Oh yes. In my previous life I was quite fond of the place. The travelogues will tell you to arrive in Athens at the airport, and depart as quickly as you can for the islands. Avoid the filth of the city. But Athens has a heartbeat. The alleys and hidden tavernas, the architecture, the history. Everyone knows about the Acropolis, the Parthenon. But in Athens you can walk down the street and see a half buried structure where they are excavating some statue or building that is three thousand years old. Sometimes there is no sign telling what it is, no acknowledgment that it even exists. You see, they have so much history here, they are finding something buried all the time. Something they didn’t even know was there. Like Rome, there is a continuance. The old and the new, connected. Roots to the past. The citizens know from whence they came.”

“And you like that?”

“Oh yes my dear. It is very important to know from whence you came. Otherwise, there is a danger of becoming rudderless.”

Penny had the feeling he was talking about himself. “Do you know where you came from Doctor Smith? I mean, where your roots are?”

“Yes, dear child. Though I didn’t know until I was almost thirty. Before that, all I knew was that I was different from those who I thought were my family. And I was most certainly rudderless, bouncing from one place to another, one profession to another. But once I discovered where my roots were buried, I understood myself. And I was able to focus on the unique talents I possessed that set me apart from others.”

“Unique talents? Like being able to hide who you really are?”

He had been looking out the window, but now looked at her. “That is most certainly one. I also began to see the world as it actually is, not as I was raised to believe. There are few straight lines. And nothing is black and white. It is mostly gray, where good and evil are often just points of view. One’s terrorist may be another’s freedom fighter, for example.”

“Like the people who helped us?”

“Yes. Like them. And I learned how to operate within that gray, using my unique talents to create a place for myself in this dark world.”

To Penny, the whole thing sounded sad. “I don’t know Doctor Smith. You still sound pretty rudderless to me. You might be able to work within the gray, but is there anything really important to you?”

He didn’t answer for several seconds. Then he smiled and patted her hand and said, “There is now my child. There is now.”

The cab driver dropped them off in front of a boutique hotel down a narrow street in the Plaka, the old neighborhood near the Acropolis. Dr. Smith checked them in, each of them in their own room. Penny had a small suitcase of clothes that had been waiting for her at the old woman’s house, and Dr. Smith had a larger suitcase with him, though Penny wasn’t sure what was in it. “Now lock the door, and only open it when I call you from the hall,” Dr. Smith said. “Understand? Do not open it for anyone else. Rest for a couple of hours. I have to make a few calls, then I will get you for dinner.”

The room was small but nicely decorated with antiques and paintings of the Greek Islands hanging on the walls. Penny took a warm shower in the tiny bathroom, then stretched out and slept for a couple of hours.

She was awake when she heard two quick knocks, a pause, and a third knock, then Dr. Smith calling from the hallway, “Penny, Dear. Time to go.”

“One minute, Dr. Smith,” She called. She freshened up, then walked into the hall.

He was smiling. “Are you hungry child?”

“Starved,” she answered.

“Before we eat, we shall go to the roof,” He said.

“Why?” She asked.

“Patience my dear. Patience.”

She followed him up a narrow stone stairway, painted entirely in white. When they were at the top, he pushed a door open and they stepped out into the night air. Penny stopped and said, “Wow!”

A mile away was the Acropolis. Atop it, the mount was lit with a golden hue from lights strategically placed below to emphasize the ancient structure of the Parthenon, with its towering round columns topped with hand carved statues, standing above the city where it had been for almost twenty five hundred years. “Doctor Smith, its unbelievable.”

They walked over to a balcony where they could look out over the old neighborhood, the narrow alleys, and marble roadways. “Behold, my dear. What Pindar called *The City of the Violet Crown*. Everyone should see it at least once in their lifetime.”

“It's so...so beautiful, Doctor Smith. I always wanted to come here, but I never thought I would after we left.” Then she grew quiet and Dr. Smith saw her expression change and knew she was thinking about her family.

“Come child. It is not a night for regret, it is a night for celebration. You are safe. You are in a magical place, and soon you will be reunited with your dear brother. And then we will figure out what the future holds.”

She smiled and hugged him again.

They walked down the stairs and wound through the narrow streets for an hour until they came to a small taverna. There were several tables on the sidewalk, spilling into the street. Most of them were occupied, but Penny said, “There's a table.”

“Oh no, the tourists sit out here. Come, child.” He led her inside the narrow restaurant. There were only six or seven small tables inside, but no one was sitting at them. Waiters were carrying food out to the people on the sidewalk, smiling as they walked past. A middle age man was sitting behind a small bar lined with wine bottles, with a small liquor cabinet behind him against the wall. When the man looked up and saw Dr. Smith, he let out a yell. Penny looked at Smith. He was grinning from ear to ear.

The man hurried from behind the bar and picked him up in a bear hug, then sat him down and called back into the kitchen. A plump woman hurried out, followed by a young man and two teenagers. All were wearing aprons. They gathered around Dr. Smith, talking, laughing, patting him on the back and hugging him, and kissing him on each cheek. They were speaking Greek, seemingly all at the same time, and Dr. Smith's “conversational” Greek seemed to keep up with them.

Finally Dr. Smith turned and introduced them to Penny. “Penny Dear, this is Andres and his beautiful wife, Cassandra and their lovely family. They serve the best food in the Plaka. The Restaurant has been in their family for generations.” They all greeted her with kisses and hugs like she was a member of the family.

They ushered the two of them to a small table in the back, away from the main dining area. Andres hurried behind the bar and returned with a bottle of clear liquid and four thin glasses with two ice cubes in each. “Ouzo,” Dr. Smith said. “Because you are in Greece, and that is what is done. But just a taste my dear.” When the liquid hit the ice it turned cloudy.

Dr. Smith raised his glass and the others followed suit. “Yamas” he said, and they lifted their glasses and drank.

To Penny, it was like drinking a very strong, sweet, licorice. She thought it was wonderful. She took two more sips, then Dr. Smith said, “You may finish it, but drink slowly, and only the one glass. I promised your parents I would take care of you, and take care of you I shall.”

Cassandra began bringing food from the kitchen. Taramasalata with thin slices of bread and olives on the side, tzatziki with pita and feta and fresh tomatoes, grilled octopus followed by thin slices of lamb. Finally, Cassandra proudly brought out triangles of baklava covered in

honey. At the end of the meal, Andres reappeared with a bottle and four tiny glasses. “Grappa,” he announced. “My family recipe. For the Doctor and Miss Penny.”

The whole affair lasted almost three hours. Then they bid the family farewell with more hugs and kisses, and made their way back down the marbled streets toward the hotel. “Everyone calls you Doctor, don’t they?” Penny asked.

“I am known by that title, yes dear.”

“But the man on the boat, the one you got in a fight with, he called you Doctor too. But I think it was after that other guy told him who you were. He looked afraid when he said it.”

“I’m sure you must have been imagining it, Penny dear. We were just two passengers on our way to Athens. He didn’t know me.”

“But he *did* Doctor Smith. I saw his eyes get big, and I saw how scared he was. Not to mention how easily you controlled him. And he was bigger than you and half your age. Are you ever going to tell me who you really are?”

“Penny. Who I was in my past has nothing to do with who I am now.”

“I don’t believe that, Doctor Smith. I think who you were in your past has everything to do with who you are now. That’s how we got here. That’s how those people in that town saved us. That old woman. It was your past that made that happen. It’s who you were in your past that gives me hope that we can find Will.”

“Well child, if that is the case, then it will have been one good thing that my past has brought me. Let us hope you are correct.”

“But you still aren’t going to tell me about it, are you? About who you really are?”

“Maybe some day child. Maybe some day.”

The next afternoon they explored the Acropolis, spending hours wandering around the monuments, then the old Roman quarters at the foot of it. It was late afternoon when they finally returned to their hotel. They climbed the stairs to the roof, and looked out again at the lights of the city, the Acropolis, then the crowded streets below.

“See, Penny,” Dr. Smith said. “The old connects the new. Brings it along. The people who are born here are chained to the ancients like we shall never be.”

He was looking out over the city. Penny couldn’t tell if he was sad, or just thinking. “Thank you for today, Doctor Smith. I’ll never forget it.”

“It was my pleasure my dear. Now we better turn in. My friends will be here tomorrow, and then it is time to find your brother.”

The sun was bright the next morning when Dr. Smith and Penny left the hotel and walked down a marbled street to a small café. They found a table on the sidewalk and ordered strong Greek coffee and yogurt with baked bread and honey. They had finished and pushed their plates back when they heard, “Doctor!”

They looked across the street where two men were hurrying towards them. They were middle aged, one a little younger than the other. Dr. Smith stood and the three of them embraced and the men patted Doctor Smith on the back. “When we got the message last month we couldn’t believe it. We thought we would never see you again.”

“I was beginning to think the same thing,” Dr. Smith answered. He was obviously as happy to see them as they were to see him.

The younger one turned to Penny and said, “Don’t tell me this is one of them.”

Penny was standing now. “This is my very good friend, Penny Robinson.”

The older man glanced around quickly. “Shhhh,” he said. Then looked at Penny. “It’s very good to meet you, Penny. But I suggest you use another name.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” She answered.

“Why?” Doctor Smith asked. “No one would know she was *that* Penny Robinson.”

“Your vacation in space has made you rusty, Doctor. Have you not heard the news in the last few days?” The older man asked.

“We were on a Turkish ship, then I’ve been showing Penny the city. I didn’t think there was any news. I was waiting for you.”

“Let’s sit, but be careful what we say when the waiter comes near.”

Dr. Smith introduced the two men when they sat down, using first names only. Brian was the younger man and Robert was the older of the two. Penny could tell they were both Americans. Once the waiter had brought them coffee and two more coffees for Dr. Smith and Penny, Smith looked at the older man and said, “Now tell us what is going on. We didn’t get him?”

“There was a problem,” Robert said. “We had someone inside. I mean someone else, besides Q. There was a girl. Q knew that they had assassinated her mother. The girl didn’t know. But Gaston had brought her in, trained her, planned to use her. So Q got the girl in place. As Will’s confidant. The plan was for the girl to help him escape, and we would pick him up. We helped set up the escape. At Disney World.”

“Disney World?” Penny asked. “Why there?”

“He...your brother...”

“Will,” She said.

“Will. He was having a dream about the place. I guess he was there when he was younger.”

“Yeah. We went after we moved to Florida when Mom and Dad were training for the Alpha Mission. My sister took us.”

“I guess the girl used that to talk them into it. She’s quite talented.”

“You can say that again,” The younger man said.

They all looked at him. “Continue,” Doctor Smith said.

“Yeah. It was a great idea. Talked them into renting the whole place. We had everything prepared. We blew the power and the backup generators. Entire place was dark. The girl was to get the boy to a tunnel under the park, where there was a car waiting. We took care of a couple of guards near the parking garage the car was in. All she had to do was wait for the power to go out, get to the tunnel, get away, then meet us outside the city the next morning. We would get the boy, she would get ten million dollars, we would go our separate ways and keep him hidden until we met you. If you didn’t make it, we had everything arranged to make him disappear and keep him safe.”

“Wait...can I just ask who all of you are?” Penny said. “Including you, Doctor Smith?”

The two men just looked at her without answering and then at Dr. Smith.

“Brian,” Brian said.

“Robert,” Robert said.

Penny looked at Dr. Smith. “Don’t say it.” She sounded exasperated. She turned back to Robert. “Just go on with the story.”

“Well, everything was going perfectly. But this girl had her own plans. Seemed helping your brother get out of the clutches of the agency and earning ten million dollars wasn’t good enough for her. She assassinated two agents. One of them we believe killed her mother. Then she didn’t show up to the rendezvous. She disappeared.”

“So...where’s Will?” Penny asked, her voice rising.

“Hush, child,” Dr. Smith said. “There is no telling who is listening.”

“We have no idea,” Brian said. “But there is chatter.”

“What is it?” Smith asked.

“She’s trying to sell him. To a foreign power.”

“Which foreign power?” Smith asked.

“The highest bidder,” Robert said.

“Wait. Just...just wait,” Penny said. “You are telling me some girl is trying to sell my brother? *Sell* him?”

Dr. Smith reached out and took her by the hands. “Penny, you have to calm down. This is not over. Not by a long shot.”

“But, why did you even try to help him escape? It was the government wasn’t it? The United States that had him?”

“It was a *branch* of the government,” Dr. Smith said. “A secretive branch. They don’t even exist, as far as most people know. The woman who is in charge of it, Doctor Gaston, is the most dangerous adversary you could imagine. It was imperative we get young William from her.”

Smith turned back to the men. “How old was this girl?”

“Fifteen,” Brian said.

“A fifteen year old girl did this?” Penny asked. “And killed two people?”

“Like I said, she was a very talented girl,” Brian responded.

“And a liar and a kidnapper and a murderer,” Penny said.

“If you knew the woman who had trained her, you would understand how she became this way,” Dr. Smith said.

“You know her?” Penny asked.

“We’ve met,” Smith said, but left it at that. He turned back to the men. “What about Q?”

“Who’s Q?” Penny asked.

“Our man on the inside,” Brian answered. “We had just started using him when Doctor Smith left, but he has proved most valuable.”

He turned to Smith. “He’s working on it. All of our people are working on it. If we can find out who the girl makes a deal with, we will try to intercede.”

“Doesn’t sound like she keeps her deals,” Penny said.

“Well, admittedly, that could be a problem,” Robert agreed. “But there’s something else.”

“What?” Penny asked. How could it get worse than this?

“News reports are that your brother shot the two people in the park.”

“What?” She said. *“Will wouldn’t hurt anyone!”*

“Of course he wouldn’t child,” Dr. Smith said. *“This is obviously the agency. It has Gaston written all over it. Now everyone is not just searching for young William. They are searching for a murderer. And I will bet he’s armed and dangerous.”*

“Exactly what the news is reporting,” Brian said. *“And, there is five million dollars on his head. All of the rouges are looking for him. All headed for the last place he was seen.”*

“Well, then that’s where we are going,” Dr. Smith said. *“We need to find him before anyone else does. And we have an advantage.”*

“What?” Brian asked.

“You know what car the girl was driving, don’t you?” Smith asked.

“We do,” Robert said.

“Then we are a step ahead of everyone else. Have you found it?”

“We have,” Brian answered. *“It was dumped in a small town. Hobe Sound.”*

“On the Intercoastal?” Smith asked.

“Yes. North of Palm Beach. We think she must have switched cars there. Headed to South Florida. Try to fly out of Miami or Ft. Lauderdale. Or just disappear down there somewhere in the city.”

“No,” Smith said. *“She has the most famous boy on Earth with her. And everyone’s looking for him. From what you are telling me, she is too smart for that. While all the others converge on Mickey Mouse, we shall look for a boat. If we find there is one reported stolen in Hobe Sound, then we’ll go to the Keys.”*

“The Keys?” Robert asked.

“She went South. She will get as far away as she can. It is not difficult to disappear there. The area in the Gulf, between the coast and the Keys is called Ten Thousand Islands. If she’s on a boat, she can disappear in there forever. And a seaplane could get in and out to pick up Will if she....sold him.” He glanced at Penny. She looked miserable but she didn’t say anything.

“And there are several airports in the Keys she could fly out of to make her escape after the hand off. Or she could just continue up the West Coast to Tampa. My guess is she took a sailboat. She could conserve gas most of the time and not have to stop to refill where she might be recognized.”

“You think she could sail a boat?” Brian asked.

“If Jessica trained her, she knows how to drive, how to pilot a boat, and how to murder two people.”

The two men looked at each other, then back at him. “We missed you Doctor.”

But Penny was thinking, *Jessica?* Dr. Smith hadn’t just met the woman once, like he said.

Chapter 7

Will could see the fire in the distance. He didn't know what to do other than just confront the boy who looked like him, and tell him he was there to free his family. He hadn't seen anyone else near them. Any alien life forms other than the people who looked like his parents and Don. So it would just be the two of them, he hoped. But Will had never been in a fight in his life, so he wasn't sure what to expect. He only knew he had to save his family.

When he walked between the boulders, he looked up and saw his family was still alive. "Will!" Penny called.

"Shhh," John was in the cage beside her and quickly shushed her. "Will," he whispered. "I don't know where he is. He walked off a while ago. Over there, past the rock is a panel with levers. It's a pulley system. Follow the chain to my cage and lower me and we'll free the others."

"Okay," Will whispered. He hurried over to rocks where his father had pointed. There was a steel panel with several levers, each of them connected to a chain, and each chain had a key hanging beside it. He looked back at his father's cage, followed the chain from the top where a pulley was connected to a steel support arm above. From there he saw where it trailed to one of the levers. "I got it Dad," he whispered.

He reached for the lever. There was a pulley, caught in a groove. He moved the lever, released the pulley, then began to crank it.

"That's it, Son." His Dad called. "You're lowering me."

"I see you're back."

Will stopped and turned around. His duplicate was standing just beyond the cages. He was carrying a large wooden stick. He had an evil smile on his face.

"I *am* back. I'm going to release my family," Will responded.

"No. You are going to die," the boy said, walking forward.

"Leave him alone!" Penny yelled. Now the rest of the family was calling out as well. But the boy just kept walking toward Will, holding the stick in both hands now.

Will backed up. He looked around for a weapon, but there was nothing in sight. He backed until there was a boulder against him. The boy approached until he was standing a couple feet in front of Will.

"You shouldn't have come back. My father said if you didn't do what they said, we would kill your family. I'm going to kill you while they watch you die, then I'm going to kill them one at a time. I'll let you choose who dies first. I think one of your sisters. Judy? Penny? Come on Will. You choose."

Then he swung the stick. Will ducked and it hit the boulder behind him. But the boy swung again as Will straightened back up. This time he swung low, and he caught Will in the ribs. Will cried out and grabbed his side. He pivoted away, still holding his side and backing up. His duplicate grinned as he walked forward, stalking him.

“Will,” He heard Judy yell. “Run! Run Will! Run!”

“Yeah, run Will,” the boy said and swung at his head. Will raised his arm, taking most of the blow.

He yelled out again from the pain, then shouted, “No! I’m not going anywhere. Let my family go.”

The boy swung again, this time missing Will as he stepped back.

“Will behind you!” Don yelled.

Will looked back and saw the pit was there.

The boy swung again, catching Will in the side of the head. It glance off his shoulder or it might have knocked him out. Will fell to the ground in front of the pit. His face was bleeding where the club had struck him.

The boy swung at the ground where Will was, but he pushed off with his feet and slid back, the stick striking him between the legs, but missing him. Will tried to stand and felt his head was over the pit. He could feel the heat on the back of his neck. He had no more room to slide back, so he pushed himself up and stood, just as the boy struck him again in the side of the head. Will blacked out.

“Hey. Hey.” Someone was slapping him on the back of the head. “Wake up Will. See what’s facing you.”

He opened his eyes. The boy was holding him by the back of the hair. He could see the fire and smoke in the depths below. The heat was so intense his eyebrows were singed. He tried to move but the boy was sitting on his back. Will had never been in a fight before. Never had to defend himself. And never been angry enough to hurt another person. But the boy was his opposite. He was the Will who had been picked on year after year in school by kids who couldn’t understand him, who were not as smart as he was, who were jealous. The boy was every angry emotion, every bad thought Will had buried beneath his kindness and compassion. Will didn’t stand a chance against this...rage. He had been so stupid to think he could win this.

He heard his family calling his name. His mother, crying. His father and Don telling him to fight back, do something. And his sisters. Penny crying uncontrollably, knowing she was about to witness her brother’s death. Judy, shouting for the boy to let him up...leave him alone.

“You hear that Will? Your family loves you so much. How does that feel Will? Love? Every second of love in your life I have felt nothing but hate. For every laugh you have had, I shed

a tear. For every hope, I felt nothing but dread. Every pleasant dream of yours was a nightmare for me. Here. See them one last time before they watch you die.”

Will felt the boy’s weight lift off him, his shirt was pulled by the collar and his body was turned until he was on his back again. His head was over the pit still, the heat almost unbearable. He looked up at his family. All of them were clenching the bars of their cages, faces pressed against them, shouting. The boy sat astraddle Will’s chest and put his hands around his throat. He began strangling him, while pushing him closer and closer to the pit. Will’s shoulder blades were almost over the edge.

He looked at the faces of his family above him. There was blood in his eyes where the stick had struck him, but he could see Penny was crying and hiding her face in her hands, not willing to watch any longer. His mother’s cage was next to his father’s and they had both reached between the bars and were holding hands, while John shouted at Will. Don was clutching the bars of his cage, yelling at the boy to get off him.

Will looked at Judy. She wasn’t yelling. She was just looking intently in Will’s eyes, mouthing words silently. He read her lips: "Come on Will. Come on Will." Then she shook her head from left to right, and mouthed: "You are not going to die today. You are not going to die today."

He remembered the planet with the underground forest. The tree that consumed humans. How his sister had forced the natives to take her when they were going to sacrifice him. When they had pulled her past him, she looked at Will and said, "I love you Will. Don’t look. Don’t look." So brave while staring her own death in the face. Worrying about her little brother. Taking care of him like she always had. He was going to die here in front of her, then the boy was going to kill her. Lower her slowly into the flames.

"Wake up Will." He opened his eyes, startled. Mandra was standing next to his bed.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"Yeah. I think so. A bad dream. I think. I think it was a dream. But it was weird. I..." He stopped talking.

Mandra held up the chain. "I’m releasing you. But someone is coming to get you."

"Someone? Who?"

"A group that works for the Chinese. They were the highest bidder. I..."

She didn’t finish what she was going to say.

"Good," he answered. "I know you’re trying to act like you don’t care what happens to me Mandra. But you do. You’re not the person you want me to think you are."

“I am worse, Will. Stop acting like you know me.”

“I *do* know you. And...I’ll be okay. It’s like you said, they aren’t going to pay a bunch of money for me and just kill me. Maybe they can help me remember what happened, and I can help them. I don’t think they will be any worse than Dr. Gaston and those people. Besides, does it really matter what government they’re with? Everyone on Earth is looking for something better, with the climate changing, overcrowding. Maybe they will be willing to help everyone.”

He had sat up. She just stood there looking at him. Finally she said, “You are so naïve Will. Everyone wants the same thing. Power. And they’ll do anything to get it, then they’ll do anything to keep it. Our country. Russians. Chinese. Doesn’t matter. We’re just pawns.”

“Well, maybe they think I’m a Bishop or Knight or something then,” he smiled.

“What exactly is funny about it?” She sounded exasperated with him.

“Let’s see. I go to space for four years, and return in something that had to be advanced technology, and the only thing I can remember is that there is a bunch of kids who never age. That’s all. I can’t remember my own family. I wouldn’t remember my name if everyone didn’t tell me. My own government imprisons me and threatens to torture me. And I make one friend, who kidnaps me and sells me to the Chinese. I mean...what can I do except laugh about it?”

“Come on,” She turned and walked to the door. Will stood and followed her.

When he came out on the deck, he looked around. They were in a shallow bay, surrounded by mangroves, entanglements of thick roots growing up from the salt water and spreading out until they turned into a canopy of green foliage, rising seven or eight feet above the surface. It looked to Will like there was no way out of the bay they were in, but he knew that a mangrove swamp held tributaries that could extend for miles. You just had to find the paths through the foliage.

Further back there were taller trees covered in layers of moss. The water was blue green and clear. He looked down and could see small fish swimming all about. “Where are we?” He asked.

“Hidden,” She answered.

“So, are we leaving here? Is this why you let me out?”

“Not yet. Once everything is confirmed, and the money is transferred. I just thought you were tired of being below deck.”

She walked to the back of the small boat, lifted a bench seat and took some drinks and sandwiches out and sat them on the cushioned bench beside her. “Turkey,” She said.

Will picked up a sandwich and sat across from her in the small cockpit. “Thanks, Mandra.”

They sat in silence for awhile. Will looked at their surroundings. He saw there was wildlife everywhere. The trees were full of birds, and a great Egret, white as snow, picked its way through the shallow water near the tree line, looking for fish. Occasionally he saw devil rays, the smaller version of mantas, leaping from the water and flipping in the air, then slipping back under.

“Look,” Mandra said, standing and walking to the rail.

Will joined her. There was a wide brown body gliding beneath the water a few feet from the boat.

“Manatee!” Will said. The animal lingered for a while, then slowly rose until its snout was just above the surface. It seemed to be looking directly at them, then it drifted away.

Mandra hadn’t said anything, but she was just watching the large sea mammal slip slowly under the water, a smile on her face.

“Have you ever seen a Manatee?” Will asked her.

“No. Not until a couple of days ago when I saw that one. He’s been coming around the boat every day. I think he’s curious.”

“I think I saw one before. I can almost remember it.”

Will looked behind them, there was a jet ski tied to the back of the boat. “Quick get away?” Will asked.

She glanced back at the jet ski. “Always be prepared,” She answered.

“So what happens after this, Mandra?” He asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you do? You’ll be rich. Where will you go?”

“Everywhere. I want to see the world. And I want to be as far from Dr. Gaston as I can be.”

“You aren’t going to try to kill her?” He asked.

She just stared out at the water. “I don’t know. I told her I was. She killed my mother. But its weird. She’s the only mother I can really remember now. I mean, she put me with a couple, but they kept changing. Foster parents, always working for the agency. But Jessica would take me everywhere. For a long time I didn’t know why. We went to Europe, to South America. Iceland. She wanted me to know the world. But we were always training. Just people and places at first. When I was thirteen, she really started training me. To work with her. Then I knew what she was. And what she wanted me to be. But...”

She had stopped talking. “But what?” Will asked.

“It was fun. At first. Just traveling with her. We were in Italy once. On the Amalfi Coast, and we hiked up this mountain above Praiano. Halfway up was an old monastery. Dominican Monks had built it as a convent. The church no longer used it, but they held music concerts at it sometimes. Classical music. These musicians would park somewhere up above it near the top of the mountain, then hike down with their instruments and hold concerts there in the little yard in front of the old Monastery. For just a few people. Whoever hiked up the mountain or down from wherever they parked. And we sat above it on the side of the mountain and listened to these musicians playing for...I guess just for the pleasure of it. I looked at Jessica, and she just sat there with a smile on her face. It was beautiful. Looking over the ocean. You could see Positano in the distance.

“I felt like...she took me there because she loved it. Because she wanted me to see it. I just told myself that though. Because she is evil. It had nothing to do with me. She wanted me as her weapon. That’s all. To replace my mother.”

They sat in silence for a while, then Will said, “But what if you’re wrong?”

“About what?” She asked.

“How could taking you there help in your training? What if she really did take you there because she wanted you to see it? I mean, couldn’t it be both? She wanted to train you. Turn you into an assassin, but maybe she realized she really liked you. People are complicated sometimes, I think.”

“How do you know? You don’t even remember any people,” she said icily.

Will looked away from her and she was sorry she said it, but she didn’t tell him so.

“I know you,” He said. “And *you’re* complicated. You’re like, so tough. And what you did at the park to those two people...I couldn’t imagine that. Killing someone. But I couldn’t imagine *you* doing that either. Just an hour earlier we were riding roller coasters, and you were having as much fun as I was. You were a kid. A normal kid at an amusement park. With your friend. And then you did that. And you injected me. Put me to sleep.” He absently reached up and rubbed his neck. It was still sore and there was still a bump in it, even though it had been several days.

“And you’re not going to convince me that you don’t care what happens to me.”

Mandra just looked back at the water. The sun was beginning to set over the mangrove swamp and the moss covered trees in the distance. “It still doesn’t matter. See, that’s what you don’t get Will, in all your innocent exuberance. You want to believe the best in people. In Dr. Gaston. In me. And no matter what we do to you, you still want to believe. But that’s not how life is. We do what we have to do to get what we want to get. People like us. And it doesn’t matter if we...care what happens to someone. In the end, we will do whatever it takes. And people like you are just going to be prey for people like Jessica Gaston.” She paused. “And people like me.”

He had been looking at her, but he looked out now as the last orange rays of sun spread out over the trees. “That’s okay, Mandra. I would rather be that way. Be like me and have bad

things happen to me than just give up on everyone.”

Chapter 8

They landed in Miami early in the evening and took a cab to a hotel on the beach. Dr. Smith was determined to show Penny around as much as possible while he could. He knew that once they found Will, the three of them would be on the run. His contacts could get them out of the country, but their lives would be completely different, and their freedoms would most likely be dramatically curtailed.

They walked the beach the next day, stopping for seafood on a sidewalk café. It was October, so the weather was perfect, and season would not yet kick into full gear until Thanksgiving, when the first of the snowbirds came down from Canada.

It was the beginning of snow crab season, and Penny proclaimed the succulent meat the best food she had ever eaten.

“You certainly cannot get this in outer space,” Dr. Smith said, before finishing his Red Stripe.

“Yeah,” Penny acknowledged. Her voice was sad.

“Are you alright, child?” He asked.

She paused before answering. “Doctor Smith, this has been wonderful. Everything. Even the dangerous parts. Like out of a spy novel or something. And Athens. And now here. I was such a child when we left for space, and now, after coming back, I see everything I’m not going to get to experience...or wouldn’t...if there was a way to get back.

“But I would give it all up, never return, if we had a way to get Will and go back. I love my family Doctor Smith. And I think so much about what Will said when I wanted to stay behind with the teenagers. He said it was all new and exciting, but that eventually the new would be gone and I would miss my family. He was right. Its only been two weeks, but I miss them so badly.”

“Oh my dear child. No explanation is necessary. I had hoped that I could return you and dear William to them, but once the Scout was destroyed, I decided that I would do my best to show you the wonders of this planet. But I knew it would not replace your loved ones.”

The waiter stopped at the table and Smith ordered another beer. Then he looked out at the ocean. He had promised he would do everything he could to return Penny and Will to their family. And short of that he would make sure they were safe. But now there was no way to make good on his first promise. The Scout was the only possible way for them to return.

“Remember Niolani Doctor Smith?”

His attention was pulled back. He smiled. “Yes.”

“Alright, I know the two of you had a thing. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Strong women have always been my weakness my dear. But I apologize. Go on.”

“Something happened. I had forgotten about it but when we were in the Scout I kept dreaming of different things that had happened. And I remembered it then. Dad and Don and Will were inside the force field. Remember she had them clearing rocks for the landing pad of her people? You were off with her doing...whatever.” She smiled at him and he smiled back.

“Anyway. Dad and Don had disappeared. Trying to find a way to escape or talk to Niolani or something. And I saw Will there by himself. So I went up to him and dropped my bracelet on the ground, then made him pick it up. Because I was a female and he was a male. Like Niolani, I wanted to show him my superiority. It was so mean. And Will did it. But before he did, he said, ‘You know I would never make you do that.’

“And you know what, Doctor Smith? He never would. I was just picking on him because I could. For no reason. I mean, we argued like any siblings, but he was never mean to me. And he never *would* be mean to me. I felt so guilty about it. It made me think I’m not a good person at all. Not near as good as my brother. I never told him I was sorry. If we find him...”

“When we find him child.”

“When we find him...I’m going to tell him how sorry I am for that. And that I have thought about it a lot and it has always bothered me. That I would do that to him.”

“Oh dear Penny. I am sure your brother knows you are not a bad person. We all do things we regret, and the two of you have had experiences that children your age should never have to endure.”

“Do you think Will would have done that to me, Doctor Smith?”

“Who’s to say...”

“Be honest.”

He paused and smiled at her. “No Penny. He would not have.”

Then tears came to her eyes. “I’m going to apologize to him for that. When we find him. And I’m never going to do anything mean to him again.”

Doctor Smith smiled.

“Doctor?”

Smith looked up and saw the man walking down the sidewalk toward the table. He stood and the man picked up his pace and then they were embracing.

“How did you do this?” The man asked. “We all thought you were gone forever. We didn’t even know if you were on the ship.”

“Zachary Smith has nine lives,” Smith answered, smiling at the man.

“Well, you’ve got more than that. Because you’ve used more than nine up already.”

They turned to Penny who was now standing. “This is her?” The man said.

“Meet Sandra Smith. My niece.”

“Sandra Smith, I’m Ronald Dale. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Penny greeted him and they sat back down. She wondered if any of them at the small table were using their real names.

“Any news?” Smith asked the man.

“Yes. You were right. She’s in the islands.”

“Do we have a location?” Smith asked.

“Approximately. But there’s more.”

“Yes?”

“She’s made a deal. They are going to make an exchange. We have the coordinates. We believe we can intercept.”

“Are we talking about Wi...my brother?” Penny asked.

“We *are* child,” Smith answered. Then turned back to the man who was calling himself Ronald Dale. “How do we know the intel is good? She is a very smart girl.”

“She is, but she had some bad luck. She used some former members of the FDN.”

“How fortunate for us,” Smith said.

“What’s going on?” Penny asked.

“FDN. Fuerza Democratica Nicaraguense. Nicaraguan Democratic Force,” the man explained. “Fought the communists for years in Nicaragua. Some of them were running drugs up here to support the Contras in the eighties. CIA looked the other way. And seems they do some side jobs still. They’ll have pilots that can get in and out of the islands pretty easily. No different than their drug running days. But what they don’t know, and the girl didn’t know either, is we have some friends there. They tipped us off.”

“Who is *we*?” Penny asked, still trying to figure out who all these people were.

The man didn’t answer, he just looked back at Dr. Smith.

“Whatever,” Penny said. She was annoyed, but happy to hear they might be able to get Will back.

“When is the exchange supposed to happen?” Smith asked.

“Two nights.”

“I have to be there,” Penny said.

“No dear child. It is much too dangerous. This girl has killed two people already. And the FDN is not to be trifled with.”

“But if he doesn’t remember anything, he might not go with us. Maybe I can get him to remember me.”

“We can force him to go with us,” Ronald said.

“*Kidnap* him? After everything else that’s happened to him? No, I have to be there. I want to talk to him. Convince him to go. I don’t want to force him.”

“Maybe we can get in and out before the FDN arrives,” Smith said, looking at Ronald.

“Maybe,” The man agreed. “Doctor, I have to leave.” He slid a cell phone across the table. “Use this only. I will call you when we have the details and make arrangements to bring you two with us.”

“Thank you,” Penny said.

The man stood up. Smith stood with him and the two walked away a few feet. Penny knew that whatever Smith wanted to talk to the man about, he didn’t want her to hear.

“Can you get a message to Q?” Smith asked when they were far enough away.

“Yes. What’s the message?”

When Smith told the man, he said, “You can’t be serious Doctor.”

“I am most certainly serious.”

“Well, if anyone can arrange it, it will be Q. UT is in control of the site. And Q owes us. I’ll get him the message. If you’re sure.”

“I’m positive.” Smith answered.

Chapter 9

Will spent most of the time up on the deck of the sailboat with Mandra now, waiting for confirmation that the deal was going to happen. They would usually swim in the afternoon, then hang out in the sun afterwards.

These were good days for the two of them, and they treated each other like friends. Mandra knew the boy thought of her that way, and as much as she tried to deny it, she thought of Will as a friend too. Sometimes she would treat him badly. Snap at him or tell him he was so naïve. But he would just grin at her. Sometimes she couldn't help herself, and she would eventually smile. It was as if they both knew it was all a game. A deadly game in which she was his captor who was going to eventually hand him over to people who would do whatever they wanted with him. But that they also cared for each other and the bitter words that she directed at him were just part of the game.

But he was never anything but kind to her. At first she thought he was trying to manipulate her. Get her to soften her heart so she would not sell him to someone. But eventually she came to believe that the boy had no deceit in him. And he genuinely cared what happened to her. To the point he would walk toward whatever fate was in store for him if it helped her to be free.

She tried not to think about him that way. This had to be done and she steeled herself to that.

They had been in the mangrove swamp almost a week when he walked on deck one morning to see Mandra was sitting with a lap top and a satellite radio. He sat down across from her. "It's time?" He asked.

"Yes. Tomorrow night. We'll stay here another night, then we have a rendezvous point." She quickly looked away.

"Mandra, are you going to just keep doing this? Hiding out? Running from people? You have so many enemies already. You can't live your whole life this way."

"Why can't I Will? At ten PM tomorrow they will transfer fifty million dollars to my account. Then I will hand you off and disappear. Forever. I can do whatever I want then."

"And what you want is to kill Doctor Gaston."

"Yes. That's what I want."

That night, they were sitting on deck when the wind started blowing. Mandra went down to the cabin and checked the radar, then turned on her radio and picked up the marine forecast. She walked back up on deck and said, "We're in for some weather Will."

He just smiled at her. “This should be interesting.”

Will helped her get everything tied down and they stayed on deck watching the wind blow in the trees for another hour. There was lightening in the distance and the thunder kept getting closer. The boat was being tossed back and forth, and the waves were splashing over the side. Both kids held on to the rail, and after a particularly high gust they looked at each other. Both of them were grinning ear to ear. After everything they had been through, the storm just seemed to be an adventure. When it started pouring, Mandra said, “we better get below deck, Will.”

They rode out the storm in the small cabin, sitting side by side on Will’s bed, and laughing the entire time. Sometime in the early morning, the wind settled and they fell asleep. When Mandra woke in the morning, Will was still sleeping. She looked at him, lying peacefully next to her, and for a moment she wanted to forget everything. She didn’t think she was an experienced enough sailor to sail the Florida Straight, but she wasn’t afraid to try. Go the the islands and just disappear, the two of them. She sighed, gently climbed over Will so not to wake him, and headed up on deck.

They left later that morning. Mandra had told Will it would take them several hours to make the rendezvous. He stayed at the bow of the boat, watching carefully as Mandra guided the craft along the mangrove trees until they seemed to open up in to a tributary that had been completely hidden from the bay. They traversed the mangrove trail for an hour before it flowed into a wider body of water.

They saw a few boats off in the distance, but Mandra steered clear of any of the busier channels. In the evening they pulled into a bay off another island. There was a sandy beach, but there were no people around. Mandra anchored the boat and the two of them sat and watched the sunset while they ate.

“Now what?” Will asked.

“We stay until ten PM. If all goes well there will be a transfer to my account, and we meet a few miles away, near an island called Turtle Key. There will be a seaplane. You’ll stay on the boat and I’ll take the jet ski and disappear.”

“Where to? There’s nothing out here.”

“We’re closer to civilization than you think now.”

At nine thirty Mandra brought her laptop on deck and powered it up.

“How do you connect out here?” Will asked.

“Satellite. K-band. It’s not for commercial use yet, but the military has it.”

At exactly ten PM she looked from the screen to Will. “Done.”

“The money?” He asked.

“Yes.”

For some reason she didn't seem that happy. She just sat and looked at him for a minute. Finally he said, “So what's to keep you from just not showing up to the rendezvous?”

“Well, they know I'm close. And I pulled this off once, so I don't think I can get by with it again. I'm going to follow through. Okay?”

She's asking my permission, Will thought. “Okay,” He answered. He had promised her and he wasn't going to back out now.

She stood and stepped down into the cockpit, pushed the button to start the engine, then turned all the lights off. “Watch the sky Will. We're looking for a low flying plane. They'll have their lights off too until they are over the rendezvous. When they signal, I'll flash the light on the mast twice and they'll land. Then I'm bailing. You'll wait here and they'll pick you up, got it?”

“Yeah.”

She noticed the sound of his voice was like when she had first began speaking to him. Stoic, almost beaten. “Will, you'll be okay. If...if I didn't believe that I wouldn't go through with it.”

“Mandra, I'm not worried about me, I'm worried about you.”

She was glad he couldn't see her face in the darkness. Her eyes were teary. She had never known a boy like this before.

“Mandra, I hear something. An engine.”

They were both looking to the sky. “There!” Will pointed to a single blinking light.

Mandra hit a switch and a light blinked on and off at the top of the mast. The plane flashed a light again and then began to circle around. “That's it,” Mandra said, and started the engine. They watched the small plane circle, as it began to decrease altitude. Mandra guided the boat toward it, then slowed to an idle. The plane had come back around now, and they could see the floats on the bottom. They watched as it skidded across the water, landing a couple hundred yards from them. Then it circled and came toward the boat.

Will looked back at Mandra. She was still behind the wheel, her hand on the throttle, ready to take off if she had to. Now he noticed she had a hand gun on the console. She looked concerned. “It's okay,” Mandra,” Will said. “It's the right decision. I don't mind.”

“For once Will, I wish you could just be an asshole to me and tell me you hate me for this.”

“But I don't Mandra. You're my friend.”

The plane was coming up beside them now, slowing on the approach. It stopped several meters from the boat. Mandra put her hand on the gun. Then someone shouted, "Will!"

It was a girl's voice. She had stepped out on the float of the plane. She seemed so excited that someone from behind grabbed her to keep her from falling in. "Will! It's me! It's Penny!"

"I..." Will was watching the girl. She was waving frantically at him. She seemed almost familiar. He wasn't sure. "I don't..."

He looked back at Mandra. She held the gun in her hand, but she seemed unsure of what was going on.

Then a man was standing beside the girl on the float. "William, it is true, this is your sister, Penny. And I am your dear friend Doctor Smith. We came for you. You must leave with us."

"You aren't the people we were supposed to meet," Mandra called, still gripping the gun, but holding it down so they couldn't see it.

"We are not, young lady," Dr. Smith said. "We intercepted your messages. We knew where you were going to meet. The funds have been deposited in your account as you requested, we just gave your buyers the wrong location. So you have your blood money. I suggest you turn the boy over to us, and be on your way. You are making many enemies."

"Will," Penny said. "I know you don't remember me. They did something to you to forget. But I'm Penny. I'm your sister. I came here for you. The way you came for me when I wanted to stay on another planet. I don't think we will ever see Mom or Dad or Judy again, Will. They destroyed the ship that we came on. But we have each other. And I will take care of you, I promise. Please come with me."

Will looked back at Mandra. She wasn't sure what to tell the boy.

"My Child. Mandra," Doctor Smith called to her. "I know you. I *was* you. You have no family. No one to call your own. Jessica has misled you, caused you to do things you would have never done on your own. She...changed you. I understand that. I was once as you are now. In many ways I am still you. But I have a family. The Robinsons are my family. There will always be a part of me that will have a foot in your world. I believe it is too late for me to change that. But this family has given me a purpose. And so I try. I can see that William is fond of you. That he trusts you, even though you were going to sell him to others. But if you care for him...and I believe you care for him...tell him to get on this plane with us. Give him a chance to have the life that has been denied you. I will keep him safe. I promise."

The girl stood looking at the man. Thinking about what he had said.

"Please Mandra?" Penny said. "Please? I thought I would never see my brother again, but he's here. Give him back to me. Please. Let me take care of him."

"Mandra, what should I do?" Will said. His voice pained.

“Go with them, Will. They aren’t lying. That is your sister. Penny Robinson. I have seen her pictures. It is her. I don’t know who the man is but...I believe him. I believe he will make sure you are safe. They both will. Go with them.”

“But...what about you?” He asked. “Those people will be after you. Everyone will be after you.”

“Will, I can take care of myself. But you need your family.”

“But who do you have?”

“Maybe Doctor Smith is right. Maybe someday I’ll find my family too, but you have a family. Think about it Will. Penny came all the way to Earth to find you. She risked her life. She left your parents and your older sister. To find you. That’s love Will. You have to trust her. You have to go with her.”

Will looked back at the plane and the girl and man standing on the floats.

He looked at Mandra. “Okay. I’ll go.”

Mandra called out, “We’re coming around,” and pushed the accelerator forward. The boat lunged ahead and she made a turn and came up beside the plane. Will crossed over to the other side of the boat where he could be close to the plane. Mandra stopped the boat, walked up beside Will and took a line and tossed it to Doctor Smith. He pulled the boat closer. Penny reached for a line running up the side of the small craft.

“Careful, Child,” Doctor Smith said.

She stepped over to the boat, and Will and Mandra each helped pull her aboard. She grabbed Will in a hug and buried her face in his neck and cried. Will still didn’t remember her, but her emotion touched him. He hugged her. Finally she pulled back and put both her hands on his face. “Oh, Will. I thought I would never see you again. I can’t believe it’s you.”

“You...you came all the way here for me?” He asked.

“Yes Will. I did exactly what you would do for me.”

“I...I don’t know...” He looked back at Mandra. She was smiling. He turned back to Penny. “Thank you Penny.”

Penny let him go and turned to Mandra. “Thank you for bringing my brother back to me.”

“But that’s not what I was doing.”

Penny hugged the girl. “But that’s what you did. And I’ll never forget you for it.”

“We must leave children,” Dr. Smith said.

Will turned to Mandra. “Mandra. Will...”

She hugged him, silencing the boy. “You’re my friend Will. The only real friend I have ever had. I’m sorry for everything I did to you.”

“You saved me Mandra. That’s what you did.”

“Will, we have to leave,” Penny said.

He didn’t want to let Mandra go. So she finally pushed him away. “Go Will. Go back to your family.”

He turned toward the plane. Penny reached across and Dr. Smith took her hand while Will held her other hand, helping her step to the plane. He turned one more time and looked at Mandra. She wasn’t in the cockpit though. She was in the back of the boat. She waved at him, then stepped onto the Jet Ski, and started the engine. She turned it away and headed out over the water, the lights out so she couldn’t be seen.

Will stepped over to the float and Dr. Smith and Penny grabbed him. Dr. Smith hugged him. “I know you do not remember me my boy, but I am your dear friend, and I will keep you safe.”

“Thank you...Doctor Smith.”

“Look,” Penny said. She was pointing up in the sky where a plane was circling.

“I believe those are the people you were supposed to meet my boy. I believe it is time for us to leave.”

They climbed in the back of the plane. The pilot said, “ready to go?”

“Buckle in children,” Dr. Smith said. Then, “yes, let us depart.”

There was another man sitting in the co-pilot’s chair. He turned and looked in the back seat. “Hi Will,” the man said.

Will froze. He was staring into the face of Agent Carmichael, Dr. Gaston’s assistant.

Chapter 10

“It’s okay, Will.” Penny said. “He’s helping us.”

“Penny is correct,” Dr. Smith said. “This would not have been possible without him. Nor the next chapter in this adventure.”

Penny looked at Dr. Smith when he said this. She wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but guessed it meant the man was going to help them disappear.

“Will, I’ve been working against Dr. Gaston and the Agency for years,” Carmichael said. “My code has always been Q. Your Doctor Smith just didn’t know who I was until yesterday. I told them I wanted to be here myself to supervise. This was the most important mission I have ever been a part of. Keeping you away from Dr. Gaston and the Agency was paramount to me. You really have no idea how dangerous they are.”

“So where does she think you are?” Will asked.

“She knows we had a lead down here to follow up on. But she thinks we are in Miami. She doesn’t know we came to the Islands.”

"You can't trust him," Will said, then turned and looked out the window. He didn’t know any of these people, and he didn’t trust Carmichael. The only person he trusted was down below on the dark water, hiding from the ones she had just stolen fifty million dollars from.

The girl beside him, Penny, was holding his hand. He believed it was his sister because Mandra had told him it was. And she was really nice to him. But he just couldn’t remember her. He leaned his head against the window pane as he looked down into the darkness below. After a while he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. Ever since he woke up in the hospital, he had had no control over his life. Nothing had changed. And he was past caring. Soon he was asleep.

He woke when he heard a change in the engine. “We’re landing Will,” The girl beside him said.

He looked out the window. It was still dark below, but he could see lights in the distance, not far away. He thought it must be an island.

“Where are we Doctor Smith?” Penny asked.

“The lights over there are Titusville,” He answered.

“Titusville? We used to live there. That’s where Kennedy Space...what are we doing?”

The man in the front seat turned to her. Q. “Your Space Pod is there. It is in good condition, and ready to go to space. It is being guarded by my men. Tomorrow night they will stand down. There is a small uninhabited island here. There is a boat waiting for us. Once I have the word, I’ll get you to the pod. And you can go back to space. Back to your family.”

“I can program the Pod for the return,” Doctor Smith said. “Edgar gave me the coordinates. Once you lift off, it will take you directly to the wormhole. Once through it, Edgar will guide you back to the planet. Your parents will be there waiting for you, children.”

”But, can we survive?” Penny asked. “We don’t have the containment units that protect us.”

”We do, Child. I took them from the Scout when we left. I have had them in my luggage all along. They were too valuable to be left behind in case someone found the Scout. The man you met in Miami took them from my hotel when I told him my plan.”

”They are in the Pod now,” Carmichael said.

Penny looked at Will. “Did you hear that? We’ll go back Will. Back to Mom and Dad.”

He turned and looked out the window. The plane was coming down for the landing now, on the water. He didn’t want to miss it. Space he thought. I don’t know this girl. I don’t know my family, and I’m not going to space.

They waited all day on the small island. It wasn’t far off shore, and a few boats passed them by, but they just waved like they were out there for a day on the island. Will hadn’t said much, but Penny seemed extremely happy. She wouldn’t leave his side. It was annoying, but she was so nice to him he couldn’t really say anything bad to her. She constantly asked him how he was doing. If he needed anything.

When it was dark, Agent Carmichael called someone on the radio. Penny, Will, and Dr. Smith were waiting on the beach near the boat when he walked up. “It’s time,” He said. “We’ll take the boat over. It will be pretty easy to hide. The tributaries run near the fence. They have opened a section for us. The Pod is on a landing pad about a hundred yards away. It’s been very well protected, but the guards will be gone when we get there. You won’t have more than ten minutes to get it launched before someone figures out the security is not there.”

“What will happen to you?” Dr. Smith asked. They had spent most of the day talking and Penny could see they were developing a friendship.

“Well, hopefully, I’ll get back to Miami with no one seeing me, and meet security here tomorrow to start investigating the breach. If all goes well, no one will suspect me and I will be free to continue my work against UT.”

The trip across the water was only about thirty minutes, and once on the other side they could tell Carmichael was correct. There were mangroves and high grasses offering cover. There were guard towers but none of them were near the fence line where Carmichael was directing the boat.

He steered it up to a shallow area, cut the power, jumped in the water and waded to shore. Smith tossed him a rope and he pulled the boat up and Smith, Will and Penny jumped off. They waded through the grass until they were next to a tall fence with sharp talons at the top. They followed Carmichael along the fence line until he said, "Here we are." They looked past him and a small section of the fence had been removed.

Carmichael ducked under it, followed by Will, Penny, then Dr. Smith. Once on the other side, they walked for fifty yards or so, then Smith said, "There it is, Children."

Will saw the Pod in front of them, sitting on a concrete platform. He remembered it. Remembered it taking off and remembered crawling in the small, metallic container. Someone was telling him what to do. And that if he did what he was told he wouldn't die. Who was it?

"Let's go," Carmichael said. "We don't have much time." He started jogging across the grass, followed by the others, until they were at the platform. That's when the lights came on.

"Freeze, or you will be shot!" Someone called over a speaker.

Smith reached into his jacket and pulled out a small hand gun.

"No, Doctor Smith," Carmichael said. "We're surrounded." Guards were coming from all around, their guns pointed at them.

Smith dropped the gun and turned to Penny and Will. "I'm sorry children. I have failed you. And failed your parents."

"We were so close," Penny said. She had started crying. She looked at Will, but her brother had no expression on his face.

Their hands were bound with plastic clips and a truck pulled up and they were put inside. None of them spoke as the truck drove across the launch pad and onto a blacktop road. A few minutes later it stopped at a metal building and they were pulled out and pushed into an empty room. There was no furniture, just a concrete floor and bare, tin walls.

Two men followed them inside. "You might as well sit down and make yourself comfortable," One of them said. "Gaston is flying down tomorrow morning." He looked at Carmichael. "She's really looking forward to seeing you."

Carmichael looked up at him. "Of course she is. I captured them. I brought both Robinson's and The Doctor to her. Now you better release me before she gets here, or its going to be your head on the spike."

The man looked unsure, but he said, "She told me to hold you. I'm holding you."

He turned and walked out followed by the other guard.

Smith was looking at Carmichael. "Tell me what's going on. And don't lie to me."

"What's going on? I'm fucking trying to save our ass, that's what's going on."

"I told you not to trust him," Will said. He walked over to the wall, leaned against it, then slid down until he was sitting on the floor.

Penny walked over beside him and slid down next to him. Will didn't look at her. He just put his head down and closed his eyes. She felt so bad for her brother. It seemed like this was never going to end.

Smith sat beside her, and Carmichael sat across the room by himself.

After a few minutes Will's breathing changed and they could tell he fell asleep. A half hour later Carmichael was snoring.

"Why did they bring us to this building?" Penny asked. "Instead of one of the main ones."

"I don't know child. There is something going on here that I can't figure out. The Agency that Gaston runs is very secretive. They have their tentacles in everything, but they are still unofficial. My guess is that these are their agents that arrested us, but they do not want the normal guards or military to know we are here. So this must be their building on the Space Center property. Still, something is not right."

"Doctor Smith, what do you think will happen to us?"

"They will not hurt you. They want to find out everything they can about what has happened to us. How we returned from space. You might be more important to them than Will, because you have your memories. But we will not know until tomorrow."

"If I am more important to them, are they going to hurt Will?"

He didn't answer at first, then he said, "this woman, Dr. Gaston, she will stop at nothing to get what she wants. She might hurt...threaten to hurt Will...to get your cooperation."

"I will tell her anything she wants to keep her from hurting my brother."

"As you should my child."

"But what about you? Will they torture you?"

"Gaston knows that will do no good. But she will be very glad that she captured me. I am afraid my dear, I might not see you again after tomorrow."

If the old Dr. Smith had told her this, she might have thought he was exaggerating. But this wasn't that man. He was just stating something he believed.

“Doctor Smith, will you tell me who you are? Who all these people are that have been helping us? And...who the old woman was when we first landed?”

He took a deep breath, then said, “the woman’s name was Laysat Baysarova. She is Ingush. That’s where we were. A North Caucasian region of Russia called Inigushetia. It is a land of clans. They have been invaded by the Ossetians, the Cossacks, Chechnya, Russia. Every one of their neighbors at one time or another. When the Soviet Union fell, they thought they might finally have a chance at independence, but it was not to be.

“Laysat Baysarova was born in nineteen twenty. She was a communist who believed in the Russian Revolution...Lenin...Stalin. But the Ingush were not native Russians, nor were the Chechens. As World War Two was ending, the Soviet Secret police began going door to door and rounding up every Ingush and Chechen, putting them in unheated box cars, and moving them thousands of miles to the Chinese border. Hundreds of thousands of people died, and Russian Nationals took over their homes.

“Laysat Baysarova was six months pregnant. She gave birth to a baby boy, gave him to a family who was making their way to Turkey to try and get to the West, and she went back home. She became a sniper, spending the next thirteen years hiding in the mountains, killing Russians. She is a national hero.” He looked at Penny. “But not much of a mother.”

“When did you find out? That she was your mother?”

“Not until I was almost thirty. By that time, I had discovered that I had been adopted. I had family in New York City, Georgia, North Carolina. But none of them were really my family. I had several careers. I discovered that I was very good at becoming...different people.

“Eventually I was captured and arrested for bank fraud. But instead of being imprisoned, my special skills were recognized and I was recruited into a secret agency of the United States Government. This gave me access to information that I was not privy to before. After years of research, I discovered that I was born on the border of China to a Ingush refugee mother. I might never have discovered who my birth mother was, had she not become a national hero to the Ingush. I had begun traveling to the Caucasus to try and locate my family, when I was told that Laysat Baysarova had been pregnant when she was deported, and gave birth to a boy who was taken to the West. The timing was right. I confirmed that she was my mother with my adoptive mother's aunt, who was still alive, then I went to see the woman.

“When I met her, she immediately knew I was her child. We would never develop the loving relationship that an orphan dreams of, when some day discovering his birth mother. The Ingush are a hard people, and my mother was harder than any of them. But I saw an opportunity. An opportunity that changed my life.

“My mother had fought her entire life for freedom for her people. It was so important that she gave up her only son for it. And yet it eluded her. I was my mother's son. But I would not be so naive. What I decided in my travels to the Caucasus, as I got to know my mother and her people, began to discover my roots, was that there was a place for someone like me who could move in the gray spaces. Offering my services to the highest bidder. Playing one side against the other. Once I realized there were no true good guys. No true right and wrong, it was easy. I created an organization. It was called Aeolus 14 Umbra. These people who have

helped us are all part of that organization. Except my mother and her people. They helped me because I am still family.

“And now my dear girl. You know who I am.”

“How did you get on the Jupiter 2, Doctor Smith? You weren’t there as a Doctor, were you?”

“No child. We were hired to destroy the ship. That was why I was there. I would have killed you all. For money. And it is my greatest shame.”

She was quiet for a minute, then she said, “Who hired you, Doctor Smith? To Kill us.”

“Supposedly the Russians. Though I am not so sure. But does it matter? In the end, that’s what I tried to do. And I will never forgive myself.”

She looked at him for a minute. She could see the emotion on his face. She took his hand. “I forgive you, Doctor Smith.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. He put an arm around her and looked over at Will. He had promised to take care of them. But now he was afraid it was one more promise he would never keep.

Chapter 11

It was late the next morning before Dr. Gaston arrived with four agents. Will had said almost nothing since the night before, even though Penny sat beside him and tried to talk to him. He was polite, but he was reserved to the fact that he had no control over his fate, and these people would do whatever they wanted.

When the door opened and Gaston was standing there with the agents, the guards who had brought them in pulled all four of the captives to their feet.

Gaston looked around the room, but focused on Dr. Smith. "Zachary, you never fail to surprise me."

"Jessica, nothing you do surprises me."

"Well, maybe I can change that someday. So you did go to space."

"I did. It was a miserable four years." He looked at Will and Penny, who stood silently beside him, watching the exchange. "Most of it."

She looked at Will. "Will it's good to have you back. I'm afraid we might have to get a little more...aggressive...in our interrogation techniques."

"Don't touch my brother!" Penny shouted.

"And now we have two Robinsons," Gaston said, smiling at the girl. "I would imagine I will be able to find out everything I want to know now."

"Did Mandra escape?" Will asked.

"Mandra? No. She didn't make it. I'm afraid you won't be seeing her again. She did her job well. She got you to like her. Unfortunately, she was in it for herself, as you saw. Let this be a lesson to you. Be very, very careful of those you trust."

"Leave him alone!" Penny said.

Tears had formed in Will's eyes and Penny took his hand, but he pulled away. He wanted no comfort from strangers.

"Now release me," Carmichael said. "It worked the way we planned. You have them."

"Yes, agent Carmichael. It is time I released you." She nodded to one of the agents who pulled a handgun and shot Carmichael in the forehead. Blood spurted and he fell to the floor.

Penny cried out and turned toward Dr. Smith who let her bury her face in his chest. His arms were behind his back or he would have put them around her. Will just stood, seemingly unmoved by the events. It was nothing he hadn't seen before.

Dr. Gaston looked at Smith. “He was your Q, but he was never working exclusively for you. I’m surprised that you were fooled by him.”

“I have been gone for four years, Jessica. We had just begun using him when I left. I am sure I would have figured it out eventually.”

“I am sure you would have Zachary.”

“Now I have a question for you,” Smith said. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“Me? It probably was, but please inform me as to the subject and possibly I will answer you. It’s not like you are in a position to do anything about it.”

“The Russians didn’t hire Umbra to destroy the Jupiter 2. I had a long time to think about it. It never made sense. The Russians working to be ahead of us in the race to colonize Alpha Centauri, to the point they would destroy the only vessel capable of making the trip? Stealing the intelligence was what we were originally hired for. That made sense. But how could destroying the ship and killing the Robinsons and Major West help the Russians? If anything, they would want to see it succeed, then they would know the intelligence was accurate. But the mission changed in the last month. We were told to destroy it. But it wasn’t the Russians, was it?”

Jessica smiled. “No. It wasn’t the Russians. We intercepted your communications and eventually broke the code. Once we saw what you were up to, we decided to let you continue with your mission, with one small change. You would destroy the Jupiter 2. But let’s see if your mind is as sharp as it used to be, Zachary. Why? Why would we destroy our own spaceship, and end the Alpha Centauri mission?”

“War,” he answered. “Russia was in turmoil. It *had* been since the fall of the Soviet Union. It had broken apart. And Yeltsin was a relatively weak leader. The Chechen rebels were creating chaos. Ukraine was a mess. The timing was ripe for war. You planned to destroy the Jupiter 2, make the Robinson family martyrs, and blame the Russians. You were taking advantage of their weakness and turmoil. It was the perfect time to go to war.”

She smiled at him. “You still have it Zachary. Yes. That is exactly what we planned. We had contacts inside the Russian mob, certain members of the Politburo, and the Federal Security Service. Yeltsin’s FSB. We had a chance to secure their nuclear arms before the attack. The destruction of the Jupiter 2 and the death of the Robinson family would have rallied the country to the cause. Look at the faces of these two children,” She nodded toward Penny and Will. “And think of them when they were ten and twelve years old. Those two faces would have been on every television screen in the world. Innocents. Cut down at the dawn of their young lives. Killed by the Evil Empire.

“Had we succeeded, the world would be a safer place, Zachary.”

“Safer for whom, Jessica?”

“Us and those like us. What else matters?”

“You’re evil,” Penny said. “Just...evil.”

“It is my job to make the tough decisions. Sometimes those decisions can seem evil. It takes a certain person to make those decisions. But now, it is time for us to leave.”

She looked at the guards. “Take them. We have a plane waiting.”

As they turned to walk out the door, it burst open and men poured inside. Dr. Smith immediately threw his body into Penny, who was pushed into Will, all three of them falling to the floor, where Dr. Smith covered them. “Stay down,” he shouted, as gunfire filled the room.

Penny was screaming, and Will was trying to turn his face to see what was happening, but Penny’s body was on top of his, with Smith on top of them both. “Don’t move children,” Smith said again.

The gun fire ceased. “Doctor, it’s okay.”

There were men pulling them to their feet now. Penny recognized the man they had met with at the café in Miami Beach. Ronald Dale.

“Will!”

“Mandra!”

The girl ran across the room and hugged him. Two men were cutting their bindings.

“What happened?” Smith asked.

“It was the girl. She contacted us,” Ronald said.

“But how did you get here this quickly?” Smith was looking at Mandra. “How did you know where to find us?”

“I put an implant in Will’s neck when I stuck him with the needle.” She looked at Will. “I’m sorry but I couldn’t risk losing you. I tracked you here. When I saw where you had gone, I knew you planned to go back to space on the Pod. But when you didn’t leave I knew something was wrong. So I contacted your friends.”

“They are not my friends Mandra. *You* are my friend.”

“Will...I’m your sister,” Penny said. “And your friend.” He ignored her, still looking at Mandra.

“Now what?” They all looked at Dr. Gaston. She was standing against the wall, two men holding her arms.

“*Now what*, Jessica?” Mandra said. “*This* is what.” She pulled a small gun out of her pants and walked toward the woman and shot her twice in the stomach.

“No!” Penny said, turning away.

"We have to go," Ronald said. "Our people have the Pod, if you want to launch you need to do it now. Security will be on their way."

Dr. Smith walked across the room and knelt by Gaston's body. He put a hand on her, paused for a few seconds before standing and saying, "Let us go, children."

He took Penny and Will by the arms and they followed the men out the door and climbed into a truck that was waiting. Mandra got in beside Will.

They drove down the road toward the launch pad where the Space Pod sat. They could see armed men surrounding it. When they pulled up next to it, Smith jumped out and grabbed Penny's hand. She tried to pull Will with her but he just looked at Mandra. She jumped out on that side, looked up at Will and said, "Come on!"

He finally climbed out of the truck and walked toward the Pod with the others. Dr. Smith had entered the small vessel. Penny stopped outside with Will. Mandra was still standing by him.

"Mandra," Will said. "I don't want to go. I want to stay here with you."

"No, Will. You can't. This is your family."

"But I don't even know them."

"Please Will," Penny said, gripping one of his hands with both of hers.

"Will, Penny is your sister," Mandra said. "She risked her life to find you. And she did it knowing she might never see her family again. That's how much she loves you. And if you never remember who you are again, you will at least know that someone loved you enough to do that for you. That is priceless."

"But what about you?" Will said.

"We'll get her out of here," Ronald said. "I don't know what she'll do after that, but if you get on this ship and go now, we'll have time to get away. But you have to go now."

Dr. Smith stuck his head out of the Pod. "We are ready children. You must get in now, and I will launch you. Quickly, they are coming." He was looking across the field toward the administration buildings. There was an emergency siren blaring.

Penny stepped into the Pod and turned and looked at her brother. Will was still looking at Mandra. The girl hugged him, kissed him on the lips, and said, "Go Will. Go back to your family. I will never forget you. And who knows, maybe someday we will meet again."

Will just looked at her for a few seconds. Finally he said, "Okay, Mandra. I...okay. Thank you for being my friend."

He turned and climbed in the Pod. When they were inside, Penny looked at the floor. There were three of the metal units on the floor, unzipped and waiting for them to get in them.

"*Three* Doctor Smith?" Penny said.

“It would appear so. Someone brought a third container here. I don’t know who, but whoever it was must have assumed I would go with you.”

“But you aren’t are you? You’ve been trying to get home for four years.”

He just stared at the three containers for a few seconds. “I think someone knows me more than I know myself. Climb inside children. Now.”

“Come on Will.” Penny pulled his hand as she lowered herself to the deck. She climbed in one of the units, watching her brother to make sure he was going to get in the other one. Finally he did, and zipped it up to his chin.

Then he turned and looked at his sister. “Thank you for coming back for me, Penny. I hope I remember you someday, but even if I don’t, I’m glad you love me enough to do this.”

She smiled at him. “I do love you Will. We all love you.”

“Here goes, children,” Smith said. He hit the control and the Pod powered up, then launched. He looked out the flight window. There were helicopters flying toward them, and in the distance, he saw fighter planes. We may not make it anyway, he thought. But then the helicopters seemed to stop advancing and began to hover where they were. The planes banked the other direction. He smiled. *We might make it yet*, he decided.

He dropped to the deck, climbed in the third container, zipped it up to his chin and looked at the children.

“Doctor Smith, I can’t believe you are doing this,” Penny said.

“You are certainly not the only one Penny dear. Goodnight children. When you awake, you will be in the arms of your parents.”

Penny smiled. She zipped her container and Will did the same. Dr. Smith watched them to make sure they were safe. He saw the containers began to expand as they were filled with the compound that would protect them from the radiation.

From where he was lying, Dr. Smith could see the blue sky through the flight window. “And goodnight sweet Earth.” He zipped his container to the top.

Chapter 12

“You’re not going to die today Will. You’re not going to die today.” Judy was mouthing the words as she shook her head back and forth.

The boy’s hands had tightened on Will’s throat, and he was struggling to breath. He could hear the sounds of his family all around. Don and his father shouting for him. Penny crying. His mother’s voice, pleading for the boy to release her son.

But the only thing Will focused on was Judy. She was calm. Reassuring him over and over again that he was not going to die. Just like when they were at the tree. The teenage girl had been dragged to it and Will could hear her screams and what was happening to her, but Judy was talking to him calmly, telling him to look at her. Not to look at the tree. He knew he never would have survived that planet without her. He had given up during the ice storm, accepting his fate. Something he was ashamed of. Something he never told anyone. And he was sure he was going to die a horrible death at the tree. But Judy was calm the whole time. Just like now. She never let him down. He couldn’t let her down.

He reached up and put both of his hands on the boy’s face, pushing against it. He felt the boy’s weight lift slightly off him. But the boy was still trying to choke him. Will saw the hate and the fury in the boy’s eyes. His own eyes. Looking into him, trying to kill him. Destroy everything good.

Will pushed harder.

The boy released his throat with one hand, pulling back his fist to hit Will again. That was the break he needed. He pushed harder, turning the boy’s head now, and both his hands were on the side of the boy’s face. He remembered his father, trying to teach Will to defend himself, though he had shown little interest. But his father’s words came back to him now: “Control the head, control the body.”

Will didn’t have to lift the boy’s weight from him, he needed to control his head, shift his weight. The boy struck Will, but he had little strength with his head forced sideways, and it glanced off Will’s cheek. Now Will shifted his weight slightly, then lifted his shoulders, shoving the boy’s face harder. Suddenly, Will felt the boy’s grip release from his throat as he reached out to brace himself on the ground.

But the boy tumbled forward. When he tried to brace himself, his hand slid off the sandy surface into the pit. He let out a gasp as he realized he was going over the side.

Will rolled to his stomach, and as the boy fell, he reached out and grabbed the back of his shirt. The boy’s weight was over the pit, and both of them now felt themselves slide forward. Will heard his family’s shouts and screams, telling him to let the boy go, but he held on to him as tightly as he could. Will had him around the waist now. He knew if he let go the boy would tumble into the fiery depths. But Will was in danger of being pulled over as well. Still, he kept his grip.

The boy had grabbed some rocks a couple of feet down, sticking out of the side of the pit. It was the only thing that had stopped both boys from falling to their deaths. Now he shoved. His body slid back slightly. "Again," Will said, gritting his teeth, keeping his grip.

The boy shoved again, and Will's weight shifted back enough that he was no longer in danger of falling. Now he used all of the strength he could muster and heaved the boy up. The boy's body slid back from the edge. Will let go and rolled on his back, breathing hard. The boy turned over and laid beside him. They were both looking up at the cages with Will's family and Don. They were all silent now, looking down at the two boys. Penny was still gripping her mother's hand and crying. The others were holding the bars, wondering what would happen now.

Finally the boy sat up. He looked down at Will. Will sat up beside him. The boy didn't say anything, but there was no longer anger on his face. They were both breathing hard. The boy pushed himself up, and without a word, stumbled back in to the dark.

"Son, are you okay?" John asked.

Will looked up at him. There was blood covering Will's face, and he was bruised and sore. But he was alive. "Yes. Yes, I'm okay." Then he looked at Judy. "Thanks Judy."

She smiled at him, but didn't say anything. The others looked at her, not knowing what it was Will was thanking her for.

Finally Will pushed himself to his feet and stumbled over to where the chains were connected to the panel. But as he reached for one, his family began shouting again.

Will slowly turned around. If he had to defend himself again, he didn't think he would be able to. A figure was walking out of the darkness. Now Will could see it was the old man. The old man who had appeared to him on the Jupiter 2, claiming he was Will, fifty years older.

His family was still shouting, but Will felt like there was nothing to fear this time.

The man stopped in front of him, still not saying a word.

Will just looked at him for a few seconds, then finally said, "You are me, right?"

"Yes. A version of you."

Their voices were so low that the rest of the family couldn't hear the conversation. Now they grew quiet, seeing the man was not attacking Will, but talking with him.

"So you are the boy?" Will asked. "The boy who looks like me. Who *is* me?"

"Yes. You could have killed me. But you didn't."

"I wanted to," Will said. "I wanted to so bad." There were tears in his eyes.

“But I am only a version of you. I am not you. Not the you who pulled the boy from the pit. The boy who would have killed you. *You* are you.”

“I can’t be both?” Will asked.

“You certainly can be both. Most people are, in their minds. But it is what is in your heart that matters. Your heart refused to let you be me.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Will asked.

“I owe you that,” The man said.

“What is this place?”

The man was silent for a minute or so, then answered him with a question, “What is your greatest fear, Will?”

Will thought about what he was asking. Death? He had nearly died so many times in the last four years, and yet, it was inevitable. The eternal dream. The one he would never wake from. For the first time in his life, Will realized he didn’t fear it. He didn’t know life before his birth, and would return to that again. The unknowing. The only people who death really affected were those left behind.

No. He didn’t fear death. But now he remembered the frozen planet, trying to make his way from the weather station to the cave where his sister Judy awaited him. He couldn’t see, he was so very cold, and when he fell, he decided to stay there. He remembered a great sadness had overcome him. The moment he decided not to get back up. But it wasn’t death. It wasn’t knowing that all he had ever been was going to end there on that frozen ground. It was that he was alone. And that’s how his family would find him. Curled up against the cold. *Alone*. It wasn’t the act of dying that so frightened him, it was the act of dying alone.

He remembered when he had woken in the hospital. Back on Earth after four years. Surrounded by doctors and nurses and all the people who tried to get him to talk. He remembered news cameras and people on the streets with signs and posters, screaming curses at him. He wasn’t afraid of them. Of what they wanted to do to him. He was surrounded by people, and yet so utterly alone.

“I’m afraid to be alone,” He answered. “I don’t want to be left alone.” And then he realized. “I said I wanted to be left alone. To you. In my dream, or...whatever that was. But that’s my greatest fear, to be alone. I lied. When I told you I just wanted to be left alone. That’s the last thing I wanted.”

“And you opened the portal to this world,” The man said.

“So, this isn’t real?” Will asked.

“It is so very real,” the man replied. “More real than anything you have ever seen. More real than any place you have ever been. There is nothing more real than your fear. You opened a

portal to this world with your fear. Set us free. Free to exchange your fears for our hopes. Your light for our dark.”

“By just thinking?” Will asked.

“Does that seem so strange? You are four billion year old star dust. And yet, you are uniquely conscious beings. Consciousness is what sets humans apart from all other species. Consciousness gives you meaning. Consciousness makes you human. You are the gods of the world you inhabit. Consciousness has made in you a way for the universe to know itself. Is it so strange to believe that consciousness can rearrange particles of matter that have existed since the creation of the universe? Forming coherent shapes that will manifest your life long fears? No, Will. It is the easiest thing in the world to believe.”

“But...this is here because I thought it? So it’s just a perception, not reality?”

“Tell me...what is the difference?”

“If I touch something, I know it’s real. It exists.”

“Because you perceive the way it feels. No more and no less. If you fall into the pit, you will perceive your death. Had you let the boy...me...fall into the pit, I would have perceived my death. And that is reality. But you did not. You chose to be you. Not me.”

Now the man turned and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Will said. “If this is real, why does it feel different than my other dreams? The dreams of things that have happened? The frozen planet? The man eating tree? The tree house with my sisters? Because this hasn’t happened yet, has it? We haven’t landed on this planet yet.”

“You speak of time the way you experience it in your world,” The man answered. “Another perception. But that is not the way time actually is. All things happen at once. You are standing here on this planet and you are in the cave with Judy and you are in the tree house and you are six years old in the swimming pool with Penny and you have just left Earth for the journey to Alpha Centauri. All now, in this moment. That is reality. And yet your perception of it draws time like an arrow. With a start and a finish.”

“So this hasn’t happened yet? Or, I haven’t *perceived* it yet. This planet? You? I’m dreaming of something that *will* happen.”

The man turned and began to walk away again.

“Wait!” Will said. “Then it’s true. What you said to me on the Jupiter 2. That I will watch my family die, one by one, and then be alone. It’s true.”

The man started walking again.

“Please!” Will said desperately. “Answer one more thing for me. Please.”

The man turned to him again.

“Can I change it? The future? *That* future?”

The man just looked back at him for a few seconds. “That is the question, is it not? The question that has haunted human kind since its awakening. Is everything pre-ordained, or do you have free will?” Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Will watched him walk away, wondering what it all meant. Then he looked up at his family, turned back to the chains, released the lever and began cranking it until his father’s cage was on the ground. He took the key that was hanging on the lever and hurried over to the cage and unlocked it. John stepped out and hugged his son. He pulled back and brushed Will’s hair out of his eyes and looked at the cut. “Its deep, but it will be okay, I think. You did so well son.”

“I love you dad.”

“I love you too. Now sit down here. I will release the others.”

Will sat with his back against the rock. As each family member was released they rushed to him and hugged him, and sat around him waiting until they were all free. They helped Will up and began walking toward the portal. Will told them about what happened to Dr. Smith, and that the last thing he saw was the smoke from where the ship had crashed. They were afraid they might be stranded on the planet.

But when they crossed through the rift, they had not walked more than a hundred meters when Maureen said, “There’s Doctor Smith!” They all ran toward him except Will who was moving slowly, and Judy, who stayed beside him, an arm around him.

“Hey, Robot’s with him,” Will heard Penny yell.

Doctor Smith was bruised and there was blood on the side of his face when they got to him. He was leaning on Robot, as they slowly made their way toward the family.

“What happened?” John asked, grasping Smith by the arm to steady him.

“I surprised them with the crash, and made my way to the hatch door, but I found my bosom buddy’s power pack on the deck. They had hidden it somewhere in the console and the crash must have thrown it loose. The fake professor and fake Judy pursued me, but I was able to get to my dear, dear friend before they caught me, and he dispatched them directly.”

“My sensors indicate that the Jupiter 2 is damaged, but not beyond repair,” Robot said.

“You stay here with the kids, Doctor Smith,” John said. “Maureen will...uh, Judy will look at you,” He glanced at his oldest daughter and she smiled. She was looking at Will’s cut now that the family had stopped. Maybe her father realized that she could be counted on to do more than he had thought.

“Don and I will go with Robot and see what we find.”

“What happened, my boy?” Dr. Smith asked Will, sitting beside him.

“You should have seen him, Doctor Smith,” Penny said. “He was wonderful.” She was sitting beside Will with her arm around him.

“I almost died,” Will said. “I don’t know how wonderful it was.”

“It was wonderful, Will,” Judy said. “And so was saving the boy’s life.”

Will opened his eyes slowly. He was surrounded. They had brought the Pod in as soon as Edgar picked it up on Radar. It was too small for all of them to go inside, so John and Don opened the hatch and entered slowly, afraid of what they might find. They were surprised to see three of the containers. They each picked up an end of one of them, and carried it outside.

Edgar, Bartholomew, and Marti were outside the Pod with Judy and Maureen and Robot. Several kids were gathered around.

“Hey, let’s get some help,” Bartholomew said to the kids, and some of them stepped forward and entered the pod and brought out the other two containers.

“Three?” Marti said. She looked at Bartholomew.

“It’s his,” he answered.

Edgar stepped up. “Okay, one at a time, slowly.” He reached up and unzipped the first one and Penny’s still face was inside. They could see her features, encased in the compound that protected her. As soon as the air hit it, it turned to vapor and began dissipating. “She should be okay in a few minutes,” Edgar said.

He moved over to another container, unzipped it, and Doctor Smith was inside. They then moved to the third container. “Do you think it’s possible?” Judy asked.

Edgar unzipped it and they could see Will inside. Marti caught her breath. Part of her had hoped that her long lost love was returning to them, but she was relieved to see they had been successful in bringing Will back. She smiled.

“Mom?” They all moved over to Penny, who was slowly waking up. Maureen leaned over and hugged her while John held her hand. “You did it,” She said, brushing the hair out of her daughter’s eyes.

“Doctor Smith did it,” She said. “You should have seen him.”

“I can’t believe I’m back in space. What a cold, cruel world,” Dr. Smith whined. Penny hadn’t heard that voice since she left with him. They all looked at Smith, who’s face was crunched up in agony.

“Oh Doctor Smith, you brought them back,” Maureen said, as they all moved over to him.

“Of course I did madam. I told you I would. But I was caught in the Pod and saw no way to escape. And so I am back. In total misery.”

They heard Will groan, and all moved over to him. Penny was still looking at Dr. Smith. He winked at her and she smiled.

Will didn't know any of the people. He looked for Mandra but she wasn't here. “Will, are you okay?” His mother had taken his hands in hers.

“I think so, but I don't know you.”

“I'm your mother, Will.” John was beside him now. “This is your father.”

Judy had knelt down by him and was smiling. Then Bartholomew said, “Will. We gave you something to forget. But, I think we can help you remember. We have to get you to Edgar's lab, and he will inject you, alright?”

They all looked at the boy, including Marti. She said, “Barth, you didn't say we could do that. Reverse it.”

“Edgar has been working on something.”

“I think I can,” Edgar said. “I'm not certain, but I think.”

Will looked around at their faces. “There was a girl. Penny. She said she's my sister.”

“I'm here Will,” Penny said. She had climbed out of the container and moved over to him.

“Can I trust them?” He asked her.

She smiled. “Yes, they're your family.”

“We'll help you up, Will.” Don said.

They took him to the back room in a lab and put him in a bed, and Edgar prepared a syringe and said, “You will sleep for quite a while. Maybe a couple of days. But this could very well counter-act the drug we gave you to make you forget. I haven't tested it on humans yet, but I believe it will work.”

When Edgar left the room, Dr. Smith followed him out. “Edgar, is the wormhole still stable?” He asked.

“Yes. But it won't be much longer. It is beginning to deteriorate.”

“I need you to do me a favor my boy. I need you to send a message. One last message.”

Will fell asleep as soon as he was injected. He was surrounded by his family. In the end he slept for three days. This time he didn't dream.

"Mom?" Will's eyes were open. Maureen was sitting beside his bed, reading a book.

"Will? You remember me?" She stood and went to him.

"Yes. I...remember everything. I was back on Earth. Penny and Doctor Smith found me."

She sat on his bed and hugged him. "Yes they did."

"It was different Mom. I...it wasn't nice. Most of it wasn't."

"I know Will. A lot of things happened that shouldn't have. Penny told us. I'm going to call them now."

She took her radio and called her husband. "John, he's awake. And he remembers. Yes. Bring everyone."

They spent another week on the planet before leaving. Bartholomew seemed like a different person, and apologized for what he had done. When John asked him if there was anything they could do to help the kids, Bartholomew just told him that there was nothing to be done except to wait. That someday, Earth might advance to a degree that they could really offer help. But after what had happened to Will, they knew at this point all they offered the children who couldn't age was danger.

Will spent most of the week with Marti. The last day she had kissed him on the lips, and told him she would never forget him.

Judy was standing on the flight deck, watching the two kids out the window and saw her kiss him. She smiled and walked toward the elevator, giving them their privacy.

The night they left the planet, Penny and Will were in the galley by themselves playing chess.

"It's your move, Will," Penny said, looking at the board. He seemed to be taking forever.

"Penny." She looked up at him. He was just sitting there staring at her. She smiled at him.

"You know how dangerous it was, going to find me, right?"

“I didn’t have a choice Will. I’m your sister. And your best friend. Besides, I only did what you would have done for me.”

“You were ready to stay on Earth with me, weren’t you? I mean, just the two of us if we couldn’t find a way back.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know that I couldn’t even remember you, when you decided to come after me?”

“Yes. Barth told us what he had done. But that didn’t matter. Remember what you told me when I wanted to stay here? That eventually all the new would wear off and I would want my family? Well, I thought the same thing. If you never remembered I was your sister, then I would find you and become your best friend. And I would make sure you were safe. We would take care of each other. Just like we promised.”

He just looked at her for a minute, then said, “I’ll never forget that Penny.”

“I’m not so sure,” She said. “It seems you’ve forgotten how to play chess.” She moved her rook across the board. “Checkmate.” She grinned at him.

He looked at the board. It had been forever since she had won a game. And back then it irritated him. But he looked up at his sister and met her grin with his own.

“I believe I have the winner.”

Both kids looked up as Dr. Smith entered the galley. “Then it’s Penny you’re playing Doctor Smith.”

Will stood up and gave him his seat. “I need to go see Judy.” He stopped and turned back to Dr. Smith. The man was busy setting up the pieces while Penny arranged her side. “Thanks Doctor Smith. For everything.”

“That’s what families do, William. They take care of each other.” He still wasn’t looking at him.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Will asked.

Now Dr. Smith stopped setting the pieces up. He and Penny both looked at the boy. “There was no implant in you. She lied. That means someone else told her where we were being held so they could rescue us. I have a feeling that girl will be just fine my boy. Just fine.”

It was a beautiful, sunny morning. The hike up to the Convento di Santa Maria a Castro from Praiano was steep, but it only took Mandra an hour. She walked around the small courtyard of the convent, sat and drank some water, thinking about the last time she had been here. She had only been twelve at the time, but she had never forgotten it. After a while she continued

on up the steep path. She passed under an olive grove, then made her way over some rocks, stepping to the side when she met several musicians, carefully picking their way down with their instruments. They all greeted her with a friendly “buongiorno,” and a smile.

Finally she stepped on the trail at the top. The Sentiero degli Dei. The Pathway of the Gods. Supposedly stamped out by the supreme beings, when they rushed to save Ulysses from the Sirens. Mandra knew it was the most popular hike on the Amalfi Coast, winding its way along the side of the mountains above the Tyrrhenian Sea, stretching from Praiano to Positano.

She left the path and stepped through some tall grass and sat down on a rocky outcropping. She wanted to get a little ways off the trail and avoid any hikers. She wasn’t worried about being recognized, she just wanted to listen to the music without the distraction. She had a photographic memory, and was pretty sure she had found the spot they had been to four years earlier. She settled in and looked out to the Sea. To the South was the Li Galli Islands, where the Sirens supposedly called to Ulysses in an attempt to wreck his ship on his ten year journey back home from the Trojan War. Her attention was called back to the little monastery far below, where the small orchestra was beginning to tune its instruments.

She heard footsteps. She knew who it would be, but still, she put her hand on the gun tucked away in her pocket and listened closely, ready to respond if she detected an unnatural movement. But the woman knew her well, and called out before she was behind her. “You found the spot, Mandra.”

Mandra released the gun and smiled as Dr. Gaston sat down beside her. “Hello, Grams,” She said.

“Hello.”

“I see you parked and walked down. Last time we hiked up the trail together. Are you getting old?” The girl teased.

“I am most certainly getting old, but we are going to finish the trail together after the concert. Just so you can see I am not yet ready to be put out to pasture.”

They sat and listened to the orchestra warm up. “Do you think he made it, Grams?” Mandra asked after a while.

“You like the boy, don’t you?” Dr. Gaston asked.

“Yes. I like him.”

“He made it,” She answered.

Mandra turned and looked at her. “Really? How do you know?”

“I received a message through the wormhole. From Zachary. It said, ‘Thanks, Jessica. We are safe. Take care of the girl.’”

Mandra smiled. “How did he know?”

“I think he just figured it out. He is probably the smartest human I have ever met. Outside my granddaughter.” She smiled at the girl. “Though this probably didn’t take a lot of work. Security is tight at the Space Center. And there was probably nothing more secure on the entire planet than that Space Pod. And yet, they were able to get in, then launch the Pod back to space. And the helicopters and planes were called off at the last minute. You are a bright girl, but I don’t think Zachary believed you were capable of arranging all that. Or getting from the islands up the Coast as fast as you did on your own. And there was the third container. It could have only come from the crashed ship in Texas. I think that might have been the final clue. I would have been the only person who knew him well enough to believe he belonged back there. With that family.”

“Were you lovers?”

“Zachary and I have been everything. Lovers. Friends. Enemies. If there were ever soul mates, we were that. But this Zachary was a different man. He was risking his life for those children. He loved them. I had never seen this Zachary before. And so I gave him the chance to go back to them.”

“I bet you surprised him.”

“It is very difficult to surprise Doctor Zachary Smith. Or me. Though I have to say, you surprised me when you killed Kariina.”

“You never should have told me you suspected she killed mom.”

“Yes, I never should have told you that.”

They both looked out at the sea for awhile. Then Mandra asked, “When did you decide? That you wanted to do this?”

“I think it began four years ago. When we were told to destroy the Jupiter 2 with the whole family on board. I went through with the mission, still I had begun to question who I was. But I made the final decision the moment I saw the boy in the grave. He had come here for help. And we murdered him. This is who we are. It is who *I* was. And when I looked at his face he was smiling. He had accomplished what he had come here for, he thought. He told his story. And he knew we were going to murder him for it, but he was okay with that. I guess I decided I wasn’t.”

“So what’s going to happen now?”

“UT is being disbanded. I sent all my files to various news agencies throughout the world. They are saying it was a final act of retribution, or possibly absolution. And then I was murdered. Heads will roll.”

“Will anything change?” Mandra asked.

“Change? For awhile. But someone else will fill the void. Hopefully they will be better than we were. But they may be worse. Who’s to say? See, that’s the thing Mandra. I know you like Will, and you are worried about him. I mean, with the dreams of giant cyclops, man eating

trees, intergalactic zoos and all that. But this is still the most hostile planet he has ever seen. Of that I am certain.”

The girl sat in silence for a while, thinking of what her grandmother had said. She was right, she knew. And she did worry about Will. But he had a chance with his family. She was happy for him.

“What are we going to do now, Grams?”

“We are going to see the world, child. It might be a hostile planet, but it’s *our* hostile planet. Besides, we have more money than we will ever spend.” She took the girl’s hand in her’s.

“They are starting to play.”

The two of them sat looking out over the blue green sea of the Siren Coast as the music from the orchestra rose up from the little monastery below.

Epilogue

Will had left the galley and walked to Judy's room. He knocked on the wall outside the folding panel door. "Judy?" He called.

"Come in, Will."

When he walked in she was lying in bed, reading a book.

"Are you alright?" She asked him.

"Yes. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"About what?"

"I...I've had a hard time thinking of what happened on the planet with the tree. When we almost died."

"Me too, Will."

"I just wanted to tell you thanks. Thanks for saving my life."

"Will, you have already told me that."

"I know, but I have not been treating you very well. I've just felt so...guilty. And the way I dealt with it was to just...act angry with you. But I'm not. I never was. It just scared me so much."

"Will, don't you think I know all of this? I just haven't said anything because I understand. I thought you might need to talk about it, and that has had me concerned, because you never would. But I gave you space. And I never felt bad when you spoke to me like you were angry. I knew you weren't. How could you not have been frightened?"

"I wasn't frightened for myself Judy. I was frightened for you. For what almost happened to you. Because of me. I...I just couldn't handle it."

She knew he was about to cry. She leaned over and put her arms around him, and held him for a few minutes. When she let go, she said, "Will, it was never your fault. What happened. And I never blamed you. I thought we took care of each other. It was the first time I realized that I could count on you as much as I always wanted you to be able to count on me. After we survived that, I knew that you and Penny and I would always be able to take care of each other."

"Thanks Judy. But I'm still sorry. For the way I've been treating you. I love you."

"I love you too Will. And...if you ever need to talk...about anything...you can talk to me."

He looked back at her without saying anything for a minute. Then he said, “Marti kissed me. When she told me goodbye.”

“I know. I was standing on the flight deck. I didn’t mean to look.”

“It’s okay. But, Mandra kissed me too before I left Earth. I thought I was never going to be kissed by a girl, and now I have been kissed by two of them. And the thing is, I like them both. Now I’m just more confused than ever.”

She laughed. “Welcome to adulthood little brother.”

“Yeah. Now all I want to do is build models.”

They both laughed and he stood up and hugged her again. “Goodnight Judy. I’m going to go study for my history quiz. I need to change the future.”

He walked out, leaving Judy shaking her head and smiling. She had no idea what he meant. But her little brother had always been different. And that’s what she loved the most about him.

End Notes

I hadn't started this with the thought of giving Dr. Smith an origin story, but as it developed, the idea appealed to me more and more.

I settled on the North Caucasus region of Russia because of the politics and turmoil in that part of the world around the time this story took place, (2001, 4 years after the Jupiter 2 launched) and the fact that the original series indicated that Smith was working for an enemy of the U.S. Of course the show was developed at the height of the Cold War, so the most likely enemy would have been the Soviets. But by 1997, the Soviet Union was no more, and many of the countries under its umbrella had declared independence and attempted to form their own nations. Chechnya and Ingushetia had been combined under Soviet rule into one territory, and both claimed independence as separate nations.

The town of Galashki is a real place in Ingushetia, and there was an ambush of a Russian paramilitary unit that had taken place there a year before my story.

Laysat Baysarova, was also real. She was Ingush, born in 1920, and Smith's history of her as he explained it to Penny was pretty much correct (except for the baby.) She was a communist who became a sniper fighting against the Russians when her people were deported. Her age worked out well to have given birth to Smith at the right time for the story, and I liked the idea of using an obscure, yet actual historical figure for Smith's mother.

The quote I began the story with was from her, and I thought it was fitting because it also described Will's experience when he returned to his homeland.

Thanks to everyone who read this series, commented, and gave kudos. It was fun to write and I hope some of you enjoyed reading it.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!