

ALLY PARKER

by Laura Stritzke

## Chapter 1

Mom's face smiled up at me from inside of the locket. I had taken the picture of her only a few weeks before she had died. The other side of the locket held our most recent family photo. It was now four years old. Dad had wanted one last picture of us together before he left on his government research trip. Mom's smile was missing from it. Dad looked old and depressed, Dylan's smile was cheesy and obviously forced, and I wore a haunted look.

"You know that it is your fault," a mocking voice inside my head accused. "If it weren't for you, Mom would still be alive and the family would be together. If only you had not-."

I snapped the locket closed, forcing the two hearts together with a sharp click. Hot tears were forming in my eyes. "No," I whispered, my voice breaking the silence of my room, "I didn't know; I didn't mean to."

"But you did," continued the accusing voice, "and then you were too scared to even tell somebody."

"No," I protested again. My voice became shriller with fear. "I didn't know." I wished that I could deal with my past and forget it, but I knew that it would always haunt me. No matter how many excuses I came up with, it would always be my fault.

The memories were too strong for me to deal with. With a sudden motion I stood up and pitched the locket across the room. It hit the shade of a small ornamental lamp and then slid to the floor. Trembling, I turned and fled the room. I was losing it.

I made my way downstairs. The stillness of my Aunt Julie's house felt eerie and oppressive.

"I need an escape," I muttered to myself. Grabbing a jacket from the hall closet, I headed outside to go for a jog.

I went back to the house after I had gained some control over myself. It was growing later and I needed to be back before Aunt Julie arrived home. I opened the front door and almost ran into Dylan, my twin brother.

"Hey," Dylan greeted me, "and how is my beautiful sister?" He stepped back and let me come in through the door. "I'm glad to find you safe because I was just about to go out and look for you."

"Hi," I responded to his greeting. I made myself appear cheerful and excited about life. I could not let Dylan know that anything was bothering me. "I'm doing great. Sorry to cause you to worry about me. I just went outside for some fresh air. It was beautiful outside."

I hung my jacket back up in the hall closet and closed it behind me. "So how was your day?"

"Oh pretty good," he replied. "Soccer practice was fun. We are preparing for our tournament on Saturday. You should come watch us."

I smiled and turned to go upstairs. With four years of practice, I had become very good at covering up my emotions and staying lighthearted. "You want me to sit on a hard bench all day and cheer for you while you play in the mud." I joked.

He followed me to the foot of the stair case. "Absolutely, and maybe afterwards we can make mud pies like when we were younger."

I wrinkled my nose at him, "No thanks." A wave of sadness washed over me again when I thought of what it had been like when we were younger. I wished that things could be just like they were back then.

Dylan grinned up at me with his puppy dog smile. People said that we looked almost identical, but I think that Dylan had inherited Mom's expressive hazel eyes and wavy hair. My eyes were a dull brown and my hair could only be described with one word, frizzy.

"Whatever," he said laughing. He started to move towards the kitchen and then bounced back. "I almost forgot. Guess what came in the mail today."

It took me a minute to think of what he was hinting at. When it hit me, I let out an excited gasp. "No way, did Dad's letter finally come? Let me see it," I pleaded. I had been waiting for forever for this letter to arrive.

"Patience, patience," Dylan scolded with a chuckle, "It's something you could work on." He pulled out the letter and held it just out of my reach.

I lunged for the letter. "Ha, I know that you want to read it as much as I do. Now hand it over."

Dylan started to answer me when our Aunt Julie interrupted from the front doorway. She had just arrived home from her meeting with some organization that was trying to save the world. I could never keep up with her latest endeavors.

She gave us a disapproving look. "Why are you two acting in such a wild manner in my house," she said in demanding tone. She set her bag down and hung up her wrap, waiting for us to answer.

Dylan lifted the letter up to show it to Aunt Julie. "We were just about to read the letter that Dad sent us."

Aunt Julie's lips tightened into a thin line. She did not believe us. "Why don't I hold onto that letter until after we are finished with dinner?" she asked. "Until then, you can both help prepare the table for us to eat. Dylan, we need drinks; Ally, we need silverware and plates."

I stared daggers at Dylan. "It is so your fault the letter was taken away," I hissed as I passed him on my way to the kitchen.

He looked grumpy about the loss also, "Oh, just be quiet," he growled. "It's your fault too".

Aunt Julie set the letter down on the front entry table. She watched us for a couple of moments to make sure we were obeying her and then went to check on the veggie casserole that was baking in the oven.

I walked over to the cupboard and selected three plates. Going back to the table, I set them down with loud thumps. I grabbed the silverware and then let them clatter to the table.

Dylan gave me his look that said, "What are you doing, don't cause a fight now." I sighed and then laid out the forks and knives with exaggerated gracefulness. He rolled his eyes at me.

When supper was finally ready, Dylan and I ate in a rush and then waited in agonizing slowness for Aunt Julie to finish. We were both impatient to be excused so that we could go read our letter.

Noticing our eagerness, Aunt Julie tried to calm us down a bit. "How was school today?" she asked as she took a sip of her water.

"Fine," we both answered.

"I learned about the importance of parasites in the human intestines," I added with a big fake smile. Dylan grimaced at me from across the table.

"Oh, um, interesting," my aunt commented, her disgust apparent in her face. She glanced down at the food on her plate and shuddered. Looking up at our hopeful faces, she sighed.

"You may as well go and read you father's letter," she announced in a defeated tone.

"At last," I cried, "thank you!" I jumped up from the table and headed towards the front entry way.

Dylan beat me there and snatched the letter from its place on the table. He winked at me and then went into the living room to read it. I followed him, making faces at his back.

I took a seat in a big sofa chair while Dylan finished. Tapping my fingers on the armrest, I waited in impatient silence. "So what does he have to say?" I asked Dylan at last.

At first he did not answer me, but continued to pour over the contents of what he was reading. "Read it," he ordered as he passed the letter to me.

I looked at him with a cautious gaze before I took the letter. Whatever it had said, it had shaken Dylan up a lot. I read it to myself while Dylan paced across the room.

*"... We regret to inform you that a Mr. Michael D. Taylor has recently passed away. Due to the circumstances in which his death occurred, his body is being considered hazardous and will not be able to be shipped to you for burial..."*

There was more in the letter but I could not bring myself to read it. It felt like a hole had been blown through my heart. "No," I gasped, "it can't be true. Dad can't just die?"

I reread the letter again and again, hoping that I had misinterpreted it wrong, or that my eyes had played a trick on me and mixed up the words. But it stayed the same, "...a Mr. *Michael David Parker has recently passed away...*"

Forceful emotions washed over me. Mom had died a few years ago, now Dad was dead. I was left with the stunning realization that everyone except Dylan was gone. All of my hopes of Dad coming back and our family being together again had disappeared. I would never have the chance to apologize for being angry over his absence or to restore our broken relationship.

I looked over at Dylan. His face looked shocked and confused like mine. "Dylan," I whispered, "I'm sorry." I stood up and tried to give him a hug but he pushed away from me.

"It's not true," he announced, "I won't believe it." His eyes searched my face with a pleading look. "Tell me that you don't believe it either. If Dad had really died there would be more proof. Something is missing. They should have sent us his belongings or more confirmation of his death, anything."

He rambled on, trying to come up with another possibility other than the ugly one that was before us. I just shook my head, trying to deal with the truth. There could be no other option.

"Dylan," I lashed out of fear, "I don't want to believe it either. You have no idea how much I want Dad to still be alive and able to come home. But we don't have a choice. The research company wouldn't send us a letter like this as a joke. It has to be real."

He looked betrayed. "No," he said. "Something inside of me is telling me that Dad can't be dead. There is part of the story missing. I'm going to figure out what happened."

Turning he marched out of the room and upstairs to his bedroom. I slumped back into the chair, today was not my day.

"Now what is wrong with that boy," asked my aunt coming into the room. She sat down in the chair opposite me.

I handed the letter to her without a word. It annoyed me when she always assumed that something was wrong with Dylan.

Her eyes skimmed the letter and then opened in surprise. "So your father has passed away?" she spoke at last.

"Well, that's what the letter says," I retorted with an edge in my voice. My world had just been slashed to pieces and her presence was pouring salt into the wound. It was Aunt Julie who had convinced my father to leave on the dreadful trip and let us stay with her.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "I am terribly sorry for your loss," she stated in a clipped tone, answering the challenge in my voice. She glanced at the letter again and then handed it back to me.

As she stood up she said, "But I don't believe that you will even miss your father. His death doesn't change anything around here. He was already away and he never bothered that much with you two anyway."

"How can you say that?" I shouted, springing out of my seat, "he loved us and you have no right to be such a witch about it." I stood looking at her with a defiant glare.

She was about to answer when I interrupted again, "you don't care at all about our family or how we feel. All you care about is being an image of perfection that nobody else could ever reach."

My blow struck. She looked shocked and a shade paler.  
Turning, I stomped out of the room.

## Chapter 2

*"Ally, Ally," someone was shouting at me. "You have to find the key." I turned, looking for the source of the voice. Then I was running down a hallway with cell doors on both sides. I kept going, searching for something. "The key," a voice echoed again.*

*The sound of my feet pounding against the cement floor rang out over and over. I spied a key hanging in the lock of one of the cell doors. I stopped by it and then hesitated. In slow motion I lifted my hand and grasped the key. It turned almost by itself. I pushed the door inward.*

*Dad was standing in the middle of the cell. I tried to call to him, but I could not make my voice work. Dad turned his*

face towards me. With a shout he yelled a warning to me, "Ally, get out of here! He's after it; you have to keep it from him!"

I wanted to ask what "it" was, but I was interrupted by the arrival of a stranger. The man wore a confident sneer on his face. In one hand he held an object. He dropped it and disappeared. I was riveted by the sight of the object. Somewhere in the background I could hear Dad yelling at me. Too late I realized that the man had dropped a lit bomb.

A flash of light exploded into the cell, then came the blast. I fell to my knees, calling out Dad's name. No one answered. Something sharp hit my head.

I opened my eyes. At first I could not see anything because my room was so dark. Gradually I was able to make out the dim outline of shapes. I reached my hand up and rubbed my head. Something had fallen and hit me, waking me from my dream.

My dream! I shuddered as I remembered the details. It had been more like a nightmare. I rolled over and tried to read the alarm clock. However, my eyes were dry and swollen from crying myself to sleep and they would not focus on the numbers.

A sob rose in my throat as I remembered the tragic news of yesterday. My dad was dead. All of my hopes for all of us

being together again were gone. I buried my face into my pillow and began to cry again.

"Why God," came my angry voice, "Aunt Julie says that you have a plan and work all things out for good. Well, losing my family is not part of the plan I had for my life." I pounded at the pillow with my fists. Giving up I just stayed there and let the tears come.

I reached for my locket, but all my hand grasped was my shirt. Where was it? I almost never took it off. Then I remembered the scene from yesterday.

"Oh no, I threw it, and ...," my voice shook as I rolled over to the side of the bed and reached down to search for it.

My hand groped around underneath a pile of books until I felt it. Earlier the locket had made me so mad, now I just wanted to feel its comfort as a reminder of the family I used to have. I fastened it around my neck, feeling the small heart fall across my chest.

I lay back on my bed and tried to close my eyes and calm down. "I wish mom were here to give me a hug. And Dylan too," I thought before I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning I went to Dylan's room. I needed to talk to him and see if I could help him deal with his emotions. We needed to stick together and comfort each other. At least I that is what I told myself I was doing.

When I reached his door, I hesitated, not sure what to expect from the other side. He had seemed pretty upset last night when he marched out of the living room and he was probably still mad. "Come on Ally," I pep talked myself, "what is the worst thing that could happen?" I did not answer my own question, but knocked with soft taps on his door.

There was no answer from the other side. I tried knocking again, but I still did not hear a reply. Now I was becoming frustrated. Why did it have to be so hard to help Dylan? "Ready or not, here I come," I shouted as I walked into his room.

At first all I noticed was the cleanness of his room. Then I noticed the lack of Dylan in his room. "Oh come on," I cried in exasperation. "I don't need another problem added to my day." I wiped my eyes on my sleeves to clear them of tears. Then I turned and left to go find him. "Where is he?" I muttered beneath my breath.

I decide to try outside first and see if Dylan had escaped to our favorite tree. It was to the left of the house and hidden from view by a row of large bushes. Ever since we had arrived here, it had been our place of retreat and quiet. Going there now seemed like the right thing.

As I had predicted, he was sitting with his back against the trunk of the tree and staring up into space. "Dylan," I called, a slight tremor in my voice.

He turned his head towards my voice. His eyes were red and puffy looking, but then I guessed mine were also.

"Hey," he said and patted the spot next to him. "Come sit down with me." I obeyed his request and then we just sat there in silence for a few moments.

Dylan was the first to speak, "He can't be dead. There is no reason for him to die and no evidence that he did die. Don't you think that it is weird that they write and tell us he died, but they can't prove it? They can't send us the body or explain how he died. I don't believe the letter. Something else is going on and I'm going to prove it."

I looked at Dylan in surprise. He had said something like that last night, but I had thought it was only his reaction and shock to the news. Now he sounded dead serious.

"Dylan, I don't think that somebody would lie about a person being dead, even as a joke. Maybe he was working with nuclear radiation and if they sent the body to us we would also get sick and die. We just have to accept the truth, Dad is dead." My voice sounded harsher than I meant it to be.

"No, he isn't. Why won't you believe me?" Dylan accused. His eyes held a harder look in them than before. Standing up he glared down at me again and then turned to go inside.

Over the next week, things continued to be stressed between Dylan and me. He would not accept that Dad was dead, and I would not accept his fairy tale explanation that Dad could still be alive.

I tried to pour all of my energy into my upcoming science competition. I refused to think about Dad, and instead focused on doing my best on the project. It was a national level event and I wanted to win. Dylan, however, continued to leave hints that he had a great plan for finding Dad alive and that I should help.

"Come on, Ally," Dylan pleaded, "You are always talking about how much you want to go on an adventure. And this is an adventure, so why won't you come?"

"Because your idea is crazy and you aren't thinking right. Besides, I don't want to have just any adventure, I want one like our family used to have together," I retorted as I turned back to the computer screen. "In addition, I have a science competition during the time you want to be gone, and I'm not missing it. Now let me work on this research paper."

"Forget the science competition," Dylan complained, "there will always be more. And I may be the only family you have left, so it would be a family adventure."

His words "only family" struck a sore nerve in me. "I said no," I exclaimed in frustration. "Now just go away and leave me alone. I don't want to think about Dad right now."

"But look at these, Ally, two airplane tickets to France," Dylan told me with a proud smile as he waved them in my face, "one for you and one for me." He went over to the desk and stood behind me. Come with me, Ally," he begged, "please."

I ignored his invitation. "How in the world did you afford two tickets to France," I asked. I took the tickets out of his

and looked at them. "You didn't use Dad's credit card this time, did you? It would give the credit card company a fit if a dead guy's credit card was still being used."

Dylan gave me a hurt look, "I told you, I don't believe Dad is dead, and..."

"No Dylan," I interrupted him. "I'm sorry, but Dad is not alive. You can try to prove that he isn't dead by flying all over the world, but it isn't going to help anything. So, never mind, go get yourself in trouble. I'm going to stay right here and work on my project." I set the tickets on the table beside the telephone.

"I bought them with my birthday money," Dylan sulked. "Uncle Billy always is really generous and I saved the money that he sent. I also used some of the money I earn refereeing during the summer. I think that I am intelligent enough to know not to use Dad's credit card."

"That's great," was my sarcastic reply. I stood up from the desk to go get a drink of water from the kitchen. The computer screen was starting to hurt my eyes and I needed a break.

Dylan followed, still trying to convince me. I found a cup in the cupboard and started to fill it with ice from the freezer. "One other thing," I asked as I turned towards Dylan, "why France?"

"I'll tell you if you agree to come with me," Dylan offered, smiling. He leaned against the kitchen island and looked at me with an impish grin.

"You are just being a brat," I countered. He started to reply when I cut him off. I had just heard the garage door open. "Now would be a good time to shut your big mouth and be quiet about your plan. Aunt Julie is home," I told Dylan in a low voice.

He raised his hands in mock surrender and turned to go back to his room. "Okay, fine," he laughed, knowing that he had made me interested and I would eventually give in. My curiosity always got the better of me.

I finished filling my glass with water just as Aunt Julie came in. She said a quick good afternoon and then vanished towards the office with a pile of paperwork in her arms.

"Good afternoon to you too," I muttered after her retreating figure. Just then Dylan came sprinting back down the

steps. He wore a panicked expression. "What did you do now?" I complained.

"Where did I leave the tickets?" he asked in a frantic whisper.

"On the table by the phone," I answered, annoyed that he could not remember. "You set them down when you were showing them to me." Then it dawned on me. Aunt Julie had headed straight for the office when she arrived home. Straight towards the table where the tickets were lying in plain view. I maybe thought that Dylan was being weird, but I did not want to see him get into trouble with Aunt Julie.

"Operation: rescue the tickets before Aunt Julie sees them," I announced in a forced whisper as I started pushing Dylan towards the office. I hoped that she had not seen them yet.

We came through the door of the office and almost ran into Aunt Julie. "Oh no," I groaned on the inside when I saw her holding the flight tickets up.

"Where did these come from?" Aunt Julie asked us. She looked at us with that "you better have a good explanation or

else" look where one eyebrow went up and the other one went towards her nose.

"Well, um, actually," Dylan stammered, trying to think of an excuse to have two tickets to France.

"Uncle Billy sent them to us a couple of days ago," I broke in before Dylan dug himself into a deeper hole. "He has been staying in France and wanted us to come visit him for a week. We were going to ask if we could go, but then we received the letter about Dad and we forgot." I ended my rushed explanation with what I hoped looked like an apologetic smile.

Aunt Julie raised her other eyebrow and pursed her lips. I hated it when she did that because it reminded me of my mom when she was mad. "I understand that you two have had a hard week, but that does not give you any excuse to disobey me. If I find out that you two are planning something behind my back, you are going to be in a world of trouble." She stalked out of the room with a backward warning glance in the direction we were standing.

"Dylan," I said in the following silence, "she still has your tickets."

### Chapter 3

Dylan came to me the next day with a secretive smile. I was sitting at the kitchen table gluing together my science board. I knew from his attitude that he had exciting news that he wanted to share with me.

"What is it?" I asked, looking up at him. "And please make it quick, I have a deadline I am trying to meet."

"Don't worry," Dylan assured me, "this will only take a moment. I just wanted to show you this." He held out a thick notebook to me. "I received it in the mail yesterday. Take a look at it."

I looked at him with an odd expression. With reluctance I accepted the notebook from him. I flipped it open and skimmed a

page. "It looks like a science notebook that somebody left at school by accident," I commented.

Dylan sighed. He had been doing that a lot lately. "Do you really think some kid at school is going to have a notebook on nuclear reactions and equations? If they did, I can guarantee you he would be arrested for possible bomb threat."

I looked down at the notebook again and read through a couple more pages. "Okay," I said in slow motion. "I see your point, so then, what is it? You said that it came to you in the mail, did it have a return address listed on the package?"

"There was not any address," Dylan started to explain, "but I think that it's from dad." I interrupted him by standing up and slamming the notebook down.

"I don't want to hear the 'dad is alive' speech again," I said with a glare. It annoyed me that Dylan could not take a hint and stop.

"No, Ally, listen to me," Dylan asked. "I know you don't think that dad is alive, but I've been reading through some of this notebook and I think that it is his. From what I can understand of it, it's about some type of energy transfer and

conduction. I need your help in deciphering the chemical reactions part of it though, before I can know for sure."

I was starting to be interested. Chemistry was one of the loves of my life. Dylan could far outthink me in physics, but in chemistry, I always left him far behind. I looked down at the notebook and then back up at Dylan.

He put on his best puppy dog look. "Please," he pleaded, "it would mean a lot to me."

"Alright," I promised, giving in, "I'll try and take a look at it tonight."

Dylan broke into a grin, "That's all I wanted to hear. Now I'll let you work on your project thing." He left the notebook sitting on the table and walked out of the study whistling.

I watched the retreating form of Dylan. I was never going to have time to read it. "Oh well," I sighed, "if it makes him happy."

I did not have a chance read it that night, so I took it to school with me the next morning. However, at school I forgot all about it because my day was so busy. Dylan did not have practice that day, so he drove both of us home from school. We

were both silent during the ride, each of us lost in our own thoughts. But when we reached the house, the comments flew.

"Dylan, there is something wrong here," I said when I first stepped through the front door and into the entry way.

"Something is really wrong."

I walked farther into the house. The place was trashed. A cold feeling settled over me that someone was watching me. I turned to look at Dylan who had come up to stand beside me.

"What do you think happened?" I asked. "Do you think that they are still here?"

At first he did not answer me, but continued to move towards the living room. He let out a low whistle when he saw the damage. Aunt Julie's precious heirlooms lay in scattered heaps, cabinets and drawers were thrown open and searched through, and tons of stuff had been dumped onto the floor.

He stopped and swung around to face me. He acted anxious and distressed. "Ally," he called, "where is the notebook that I gave to you? Did you take it to school with you or did you leave it here?"

I looked at him confused. Why was he worrying about the notebook now? Somebody had trashed our house and there was a good chance that they could still be here.

"I took it to school," I replied. "It's still in my backpack." I pointed towards the hall where I had dropped it after coming inside. "Why? You don't think that any of this is connected with it, do you?"

Dylan picked up my backpack and dumped it out onto the floor. "I'm not sure," Dylan answered over his shoulder. "Did you ever get a chance to read it?" He found the notebook and stood back up.

I looked at him with a sheepish grin. "Um, no," I admitted. "I didn't have time and then I forgot all about it."

He sighed and gave me a disappointed look. "Well," he explained, "if you had looked through some of it, you might understand. I think whoever did this was looking for the notebook. I think they want the information from the notes."

I froze, remembering my nightmare I had had a couple of nights before. I felt a shiver travel up my spine. "Was the notebook the 'it' that my dad had been talking about," I wondered. I looked around me with wide eyes, imagining what had

taken place. Thank goodness it did not look like they were still here.

"I am going to go call the police," I said. "I think that this is way out of our hands."

Dylan nodded with a grim smile. "Good idea," he said, "and we should probably call Aunt Julie also. She is going to freak out when she sees her house."

He walked towards the study with the notebook under his arm. I went to the kitchen and made the necessary calls.

I started to feel safer when the police department arrived. They went right to work asking us questions and trying to gather evidence. Aunt Julie arrived as soon as she could come. When she saw what had happened to her house, she went off the deep end. She yelled at the officers trying to collect evidence, she yelled at her insurance agent on the phone, and of course she yelled at us. A police officer asked us to stay at a hotel for a couple of nights so that we would not disturb the crime scene, and she about bit his head off. I tried to be patient with her, but I definitely have my limitations in that area.

When we were finally settled into hotel rooms that night and Aunt Julie was going to sleep, I went to Dylan's room with

the notebook. I had confiscated it back from him earlier that afternoon.

He was still up researching something on his laptop. He looked up at me. Coming over I handed the notebook to him. "You were right," I spoke in a soft tone so I would not wake up Aunt Julie, "it is dad's notebook." I pointed to a handwritten journal entry that I had found between pages of equations.

*"Ally would love to be here at the laboratory working with us on this experiment. She has always loved chemistry. We have discovered amazing things about the properties of hydrogen and how we can harness it and use it in everyday life. However, Cecil was here today. He is a fox and is out to steal our secret. I must remember to keep this notebook well hidden so that he never gets a hold of it.*

Dylan's eyebrows went straight up from his surprise. "That's not all," I told him, look here." I flipped a couple of pages forward to another handwritten note.

*"Cecil has me worried. He acts much too cocky. I wanted to report him and have him restricted from the laboratory, but the manager has agreed to let his company work with us. I'm not sure why. He needs to be carefully watched however. He is a*

*dangerous man to be around when you are standing in the way of what he wants.*

Dylan looked at me with questioning eyes. He was piecing it together in his head. "Ally, this notebook was mailed after the letter said that Dad was supposed to be dead. There is no evidence that Dad did die, but here we have a notebook with valuable 'secrets', a guy named Cecil that Dad is worried about, and Dad trying to protect the notebook. We are sent the notebook and now we have a trashed house. It feels like this is only beginning. I think that Dad sent us the notebook to keep it from Cecil."

I bit my lip and then opened the notebook to one more page. "Here," I said, "I think that you are right."

*"Cecil is a madman and must never find out what we have discovered. Already some of the scientists on the team have disappeared. The rest of us sleep uneasily at night. We know that we have discovered a secret that is too dangerous. I trust most of the people here, but there are some that I am afraid would give in to Cecil. I am going to do my best, but I am afraid that I have been targeted next by him. I don't think that he will kill me, because I have what he needs, but I don't know for sure.*

Dylan tapped the page as he thought. "Now scientists are disappearing. Do you believe me now," he asked, "or do you still think that Dad just died all of a sudden?"

"I don't think I have a choice but to believe you." I went over and sat down on his bed. "The question is now, what do we do?"

"We find out where he is and we save him," Dylan answered. "I already have the tickets to France. I found them under a pile of stuff thrown down in the study. Do you think Aunt Julie even remembers about them?"

"I wouldn't know. She has a lot on her mind right now. By the way," I said, "why France?"

He grinned. "Because that is where dad's last research partner is currently located and I think that he may know where Dad is, or at least a clue as to where he might be."

"How did you find that out?" I asked curious where he would come across information like that. I had thought that that kind of information would be top secret, everything else about Dad was.

"I have been doing some research on the computer," Dylan admitted, "and I hacked into Dad's list of email contacts."

I looked at him with disbelief written on my face. "I didn't even know Dad had email, and now you're telling me you just hacked into it."

Dylan shrugged, "I guess he has one for work." He grinned at me in pride, "and yes, I was able to do it."

I sighed. I could not believe that Dylan thought that I was the one with problems. "So after France where do we go?" I asked. "I hope you have a good plan."

"I don't know," Dylan answered. "I was hoping to figure that out with Dr. Martin. I thought that he might have a few ideas."

"Have you contacted Dr. Martin yet," I asked, "or are we going to just show up at his front door and surprise him." I could tell now that any planning we did was going to have to be done by me or we would end up in a bigger mess than our house was at the present.

"I'll call him before we leave," Dylan promised.

"I bet you will," I told him as I stood up and headed towards the door to his room. I paused before leaving and turned to look at Dylan. "I guess this means that I have to miss the science competition."

A look of regret crossed Dylan's face, "Yeah, I'm sorry sis. Is there any way you could enter without actually going to the competition? Maybe a friend could enter it for you."

"I don't know," I replied, "but I'll worry about it tomorrow. Right now I plan on going to bed and sleeping. Good night."

"Good night, sleep tight," Dylan echoed.

I closed the door behind me as I left and made my way back towards my room. A sick feeling had settled over my stomach. We were disobeying Aunt Julie and I knew we were going to be in a lot of trouble. Yet I could not deny that I really wanted to go with Dylan.

## Chapter 4

We were able to move out of the hotel and back into Aunt Julie's house after only a few days. A cleaning crew had gone through and picked up as much as they could. In fact, my room looked even better than before the whole break-in episode.

"Wow," I commented as I walked back down the stairs to the kitchen, "this place looks nice."

Aunt Julie stood by the refrigerator, peering at the calendar. "And I expect it to still be this nice when I get back," she responded. "I have a conference in New York with my ladies ministry group that I need to leave for."

"Wait, when are you leaving," Dylan asked from the living room where he had been watching TV.

"If you want to talk to me," Aunt Julie called back, "you can come in here and quit shouting across my house." She grabbed a pen and scribbled some phone numbers onto a sticky note. Checking over her work, she attached it to the calendar.

Dylan appeared in the doorway and saluted. "Yes ma'am."

Ignoring the sarcasm in Dylan's voice, Aunt Julie answered his earlier question. "I'm leaving tomorrow morning, early. I will probably be out of the house before you even attempt to drag yourself out of bed. I hope to be back in two weeks, so I should be returning in time to see your science project at the competition, Ally." Aunt Julie tapped the sticky note. "I did not have time to find a baby sitter, so you two are going to have to stay here alone. If you have any problems, call these numbers."

Dylan and I shared a secret smile across the room. With Aunt Julie leaving, we would be free to go on our own adventure. "Yes," I cheered silently.

That night I packed my suitcase and hid it in my closet. Dylan and I would be leaving tomorrow afternoon. I opened up the notebook and flipped through the pages. Somewhere in here was the answer to Dylan and mine questions. I just had to find it.

The flight to France was uneventful. We spent most of it either sleeping or watching TV. After making it off the airplane and through security, Dylan went to pick up our suitcases and make a call to Dr. Martin.

I waited for him at a small restaurant near a window that overlooked planes taking off and landing. I could barely keep my eyes open because of jet lag and was glad that Dylan was ready to help.

It took longer than I had expected before Dylan came back. "I'm sorry," he explained. "I could have used your help in trying to rent a taxi. My French is terrible."

I smiled at the picture of Dylan trying to speak French. He had no knack for speaking any foreign language, of course, neither did I. "I completely understand," I told him. "Are we ready to go?"

He nodded. Together we managed to carry all of our stuff to the taxi and load it into the trunk. The taxi driver said something in French and then we were off. I started to become excited. Our adventure was starting to really happen.

I watched out my window as the sights of Paris flew by. Then the taxi turned down a street that led to the older part of

town. It slowed to a stop in front of a run-down café. I looked over at Dylan, surprised at the result of our trip. "Are you sure this is the place we are supposed to meet Dr. Martin at?" I asked.

His face held a focused look. "Yeah, come on," he replied as he climbed out of the car and paid the driver.

I followed him onto the sidewalk. "Dylan, this place gives me the creeps," I complained.

"Shh," he whispered, "just trust me."

I clamped my mouth shut. Why did Dylan always have to act like he was in charge? "Dear God," I thought to myself in a last minute kind of prayer, "please help us."

Dylan and I entered the restaurant. The place smelled like burnt coffee and stale air. I wrinkled my nose in disgust. Stepping with care, I walked around a stack of old newspapers. My feet raised little dust clouds when I pressed down.

Dylan motioned me towards a booth in the back where a dark figure was sitting. "Do you want me to order you something to eat?" he offered.

I glanced around at the peeling paint, the menu sign that was half attached to the wall, and the dirty dishes stacked on

tables everywhere. "Um, no thanks," I said. "I think that I can wait to eat at a different place."

He shrugged and went to order himself a Coke. "Suit yourself," he answered, "but I don't know when you will have another chance to eat."

The figure in the back waved to me as I came over to sit down. "You must be Ally," assumed the man.

"Yeah," I replied, "and you must be Dr. Martin." Up close now, I could see that he was an older guy, about 55, with glasses and a big bald spot. I took a seat opposite him, sitting down in the old chair with care.

"I must say," Dr. Martin said to me, "that I was very surprised to receive a phone call from your brother. I was even more surprised by his request. He asked about your father and if I knew what was going on. Suppose we start by you telling me what you hope to learn from this meeting."

I started to answer, but was interrupted by Dylan's arrival. "Hey," he greeted us, setting his Coke down on the table. He offered his hand to Dr. Martin to shake and then sat down beside me. "What are we talking about?"

Dylan's casual behavior seemed strange to me. I was out of my comfort zone and starting to feel sick from uncertainty.

"Dr. Martin," I spoke up again. "We want to know the truth about our father. Is he still alive, or did he really die?"

There it was, the question that I so dreaded an answer was asked. It had been easy to believe that Dad was alive back home, but now I could feel doubts nagging at my mind.

Dr. Martin leaned back in his chair and studied us. "Your father," he replied at last, "is very much alive, but also very much in danger. The question is now what are you going to do about it."

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to relax deeper into the seat. "Hallelujah," I murmured to myself.

Dylan sat up straighter in his chair beside me. "You are positive, though, that he is alive?" he asked, his gaze intent on studying Dr. Martin's reaction.

Dr. Martin smiled a secretive smile. "Yes," he said with an air of boredom. He took off his glasses, laying them on the table. "Yes I am quite sure, though like I said, your father is in danger."

Dylan leaned back and out of habit began to tap his fingers on the table. Dr. Martin glanced down at Dylan's hand and then back up at us.

"You don't believe me?" he asked.

I place my hand over Dylan's to stop his incessant tapping noise. I focused my attention on Dr. Martin, ignoring the warning looks that Dylan was sending me.

"I believe you," I spoke with an even voice. "I think that I would believe almost anybody right now just to have the hope that my dad was still living." I felt for the locket hanging around my neck, clutching it with my hand. "Do you know where he is or how we can find him?"

Dylan broke into the conversation. "Dr. Martin, do you think that you would be willing to help us rescue our father?" His voice sounded guarded and reserved.

Dr. Martin took a sip from his coffee. The restaurant room, already dim from lack lighting, had grown darker still.

"Tell you what," he offered. "It is getting late. Why don't you two stay with me tonight, and we will discuss it tomorrow. Or did you have somewhere else you were planning to stay?"

Dylan and I exchanged amused looks. Did we even have a plan for anything that was going on?

"We would appreciate your hospitality tonight," I replied. "But could you at least promise to point us in the right direction?"

Dr. Martin nodded with a slow motion. His eyes had a look in them that I had never seen before, but I could not tell if it was only the shadows in the room.

"Yes," he said in a strange voice, "I will at least start you in the right direction."

A shiver crawled up my spine. I ignored it. We needed Dr. Martin's help and I had to trust him. I reached for Dylan's hand underneath the table and squeezed it.

"Great," I said. "Let's go find a taxi."

We left a small tip on the grimy table and gathered together our belongings. Dr. Martin led us out of the restaurant and out onto the sidewalk.

"One moment and the taxi will be here," he said as he finished a call on his cell phone.

The taxi took us through winding streets and at last to an older apartment complex. I almost fell asleep during the trip there from all of the excitement we had experienced that day. I was only too glad when Dr. Martin finished setting up two couches in his living room as beds and I could go to bed.

## Chapter 5

Dr. Martin woke us up very early the next morning. "Hurry up and get ready," he ordered. "I have a plane rented for us to use to fly to your father. We need to leave by 6:00 a.m. in order have an early start."

I sat up squinted in the bright light. A clock on the wall read 4:30 a.m. Dr. Martin had already disappeared into another room.

"I thought that we were going to make our plans today," I complained to Dylan. "Why in the world do we have to wake up so early?"

From across the room Dylan groaned and pulled a pillow over his face. That was the best response he would give me.

Yawning, I forced myself to roll off the couch and stand up. I went over to Dylan and pulled off his blanket, dropping it to the floor.

"Come on," I told him, "Dr. Martin says that we need to be ready to leave by 6:00 a.m. It is time to wake up." I left him to go find Dr. Martin.

Now that it was light, I could see that his apartment was neat and clean. The walls were decorated with pictures of ships and storms at sea. On a table in the entryway, there was a model of a boat inside of a bottle.

"Pretty impressive," I thought to myself as I ran my fingers along the outside of the glass. "Not what I would have expected from a scientist."

The sounds of drawers opening and closing arrested my attention. I went to find the source of the noise and found Dr. Martin in the kitchen. He was digging through the contents of a desk drawer in search of something.

"Do you need any help," I asked as I approached him.

He glanced up at me and shut the drawer with a bang. Straightening up, He walked over to the counter to pick up his

coffee cup. "No, I think I found it," he said. "Are you ready to go?"

I looked down at my PJ's and then gave him a weird look. "Um, not yet," I replied. "Why are we leaving? I thought that we had not decided anything final yet about what we were doing."

Dr. Martin took a sip of his drink and then set the cup down. "I promised you that I would help you, right? Well, now I am helping you. We are going to take a plane to the island where your father is located and try to help him. Do you have a problem with this?"

My first reaction was one of defense. It was not my fault that he had not explained things to us before now.

"No I do not have a problem with it," I said in a clipped tone. "I just like to know what is happening."

I would have said more and ended up in an argument, but Dylan had managed to stumble into the kitchen and find us. His eyes were still half closed and he kept yawning.

"What is for breakfast?" he asked.

Dr. Martin grinned at him. He went to a cabinet and pulled out a box of pop tarts. "Here," he offered, handing them to Dylan, "enjoy. We leave in an hour. All of your suitcases need

to be sorted and consolidated. The plane is small and we will not have much room for extras."

Dylan and I managed to finish getting ready and downsize our luggage by 6:00 a.m. Dr. Martin drove us to a small hangar about 40 min. from his apartment. It was a small plane and did not look enjoyable to ride in.

"Are you sure you know how to fly a plane?" I questioned Dr. Martin. He was obviously not the flying type and I really did not want to die in a plane crash. Dylan and I had flown before with our dad, but it had been a different kind of plane and I had trusted my dad to take care of me.

"Of course I can," he snapped.

Dylan let me sit in front with Dr. Martin in the copilot seat while he squeezed into the back. I shifted to a more comfortable position, being careful not to touch the pedals at my feet. I was scared that I would somehow mess up the plane if I touched anything.

Dr. Martin radioed the tower and received permission for take-off. "Now, just relax and enjoy the ride," he told us.

True to his word, Dr. Martin managed to fly the airplane off of the runway and into the air. The first few moments of

flight were frightening, but then Dr. Martin evened out the plane. The butterflies in my stomach quieted down as I became used to the flying motion and I stopped feeling as nervous.

Dylan leaned forward on his elbows so that he could see out the cockpit window. He glanced at my face and laughed when he saw my anxious expression.

"You aren't scared are you," he teased.

I glared at him. "Of course not," I defended myself. "I am enjoying everything that you have dragged me into."

Dylan grinned and turned to look at Dr. Martin. "So how long is this trip going to take," he asked.

Dr. Martin thought a moment. He checked a dial on the panel in front of him and then flipped on the autopilot switch.

"Oh, about four hours if we don't fly into trouble," he replied in answer to Dylan. "We should be in New Zealand before noon. Just sit back and enjoy the view."

I dug out the notebook from my travel-on bag. Now was as good a time as any to ask Dr. Martin my questions.

Dr. Martin glanced over at the notebook. "Is that the one your Dad sent you guys?"

"Yeah," I answered. "We have been trying to go through it and figure some of it out, but a lot of it is above us."

"Hey," Dylan called from the backseat, "I understand most of it. I just can't follow the reaction pattern very well."

I ignored Dylan and waited for Dr. Martin's response.

"Well," Dr. Martin replied. "I don't think that you need to understand all the details. The most important thing to know is that your dad was working on refining hydrogen fusion as a safe, reusable, and inexpensive fuel source. Unfortunately, what can be used as a fuel source, can also be used as a weapon. When Cecil got wind of what was going on, he made it his goal to obtain the secret. Eventually he started using force to get what he wanted. That is why he abducted your father."

"Wait a minute," Dylan broke in, "how come nobody tried to stop him?"

Dr. Martin explained, "Because Cecil is a powerful man and only a few even knew that this project was being worked on. In fact, not even the U.S. government was let in on the secret."

"Really?" I asked. "That is pretty top secret." I flipped through a couple of handwritten notes I had taken. "Is the

hydrogen fusion 'secret' only found in this notebook, or could Cecil learn about it elsewhere?"

After thinking for a moment, Dr. Martin answered, "If it is written down anywhere else, I don't know about it. Though, I guess that it is always possible."

I had more questions that I wanted to ask, but Dr. Martin had switched his headset to a different radio frequency and was communicating with a ground based station. Giving up, I relaxed back into my seat and eventually drifted off to sleep. I was making up for missing sleep last night.

Dylan tugged me awake when we were about twenty minutes from landing. I rubbed my eyes to clear them and then eagerly peered out the windows. I could not wait for my first glimpse of New Zealand. Part of me hoped that I would be able to see where Dad was.

Dr. Martin circled the plane around several times before attempting to land. The runway looked broken up and unused. "Oh boy," I thought. "This is going to be rough."

I looked back at Dylan. His face wore doubt for Dr. Martin's landing abilities. "Uhh," he stuttered, "Dr. Martin, I'm not so sure this plane can handle that sort of landing."

I rolled my eyes. Now who was nervous?

"I'm tired of your complaints," Dr. Martin said. "Just trust me for once."

The plane descended in a slow controlled manner, and then hit the ground with a thud. After that it all went wild. The plane went over the bumps at a quick clip, bouncing all of us around inside. At the end of the runway was a huge ridge. When the plane reached it, the landing gear was torn off and the plane started into a spin, right towards the trees on the right.

"Ahhhh," I yelled. "We are going to die."

The plane started to flip over onto its side. By now all three of us were screaming. The wing folded beneath the pressure of the cab and the plane fell upside down. We would have probably all been crushed to death, except the plane had reached the tree line and the branches kept it from falling all the way.

"Get me out of here, ahhhhh," I kept screaming. My response to any frightening situation was always one of panic.

Dr. Martin hit me across the face and then yelled at me to "Shut up." He tried to undo his safety belt and almost caused the plane to fall again.

Surprised by his show of anger, I quieted down.

Together we worked on climbing out of the plane. There were several close calls where we almost tipped the plane. In the end we all made it out safe and sound.

"Great," I commented as I surveyed the wreck, "the plane is completely ruined. We are going to have to figure out a different way to travel."

"And all our stuff is still trapped in there," Dylan threw in. "Looks like you are going to have to live without your lip gloss for a while."

I gave him a warning look. "My lip gloss was in my travel bag, which fortunately I still have because the notebook was also in there."

Dylan shrugged and walked over to join Dr. Martin. "So what do we do now?" he asked.

"I rented a boat from a small fishing town, nearby. We go pick it up and then travel to the island I think your father is on. Hopefully we find him still alive."

## Chapter 6

It was not a far walk to the village. Once there, Dr. Martin led us to a small dock and pointed at the boat he had rented. "There she is," he announced proudly.

Dylan leaned over and whispered to me, "At least the boat has a motor, though she does not have much else. I thought that the plane was skimpy, but this tops it all."

I had to agree with him. "Think positive thoughts: adventure, excitement, and new challenges," I replied. "It will put the situation in a better perspective."

After we had settled in and Dr. Martin figured out how to start the motor, we set off. "It should not be a long trip," he told us. "The island is only a couple hundred miles away."

"I will hold you to that," I replied, glancing down at my watch. It read 11:47 a.m.

Dylan stretched his arms and shifted to a more comfortable position. "Now let's go rescue Dad."

Dr. Martin nodded and revved the motor. The boat picked up speed and began to leave the island behind. "Dylan," Dr. Martin asked, "Do you think that you could dig out my GPS from the bag in front? It should be in the inside pocket."

"Absolutely," Dylan agreed. "I don't suppose that you have any water in there also."

"Or food," I added. "I'm starving. In fact I would do almost anything right now to have a big bowl of ice cream."

"Sorry kids," Dr. Martin replied. "I don't have any supplies. We'll try and find some when we reach the island." He took the GPS from Dylan and then adjusted the direction of the boat.

The weather at first was hot and sunny. After a while a strong breeze began to blow and in the distance dark clouds started to form. The sun was still shining, but the air felt colder.

"I hope it doesn't rain before we reach the island," Dylan commented.

"We should be there soon," Dr. Martin replied. "I don't think that the weather will bother us."

I prayed silently that Dr. Martin was right and that we would be able to find my father and rescue him soon.

Dr. Martin cut the motor when we neared the shore and let the boat drift. "We are looking for a small inlet," he told us. "Keep your eyes open for it."

Dylan and I peered closely at the shore, hoping to be the first one to spy it. Both of us were eager to reach our father soon. I could feel the suspense building in me.

"There," I pointed ahead, "is that it?"

Dylan held his hand over his eyes and squinted. "Yes," he said in excitement, "I think it is! We are almost there."

I turned to face Dr. Martin, looking for some sign of approval, but he was staring intently at the bank. He looked deep in thought. "Umm, Dr. Martin," I said, waving to get his attention. "I think that I found it."

He nodded absently and then started the motor quietly, maneuvering the boat towards the middle of the river. He kept our speed slow to reduce the noise made by the engine.

When we first entered the cover of the jungle, it reminded me of a dark cave. I leaned over the side of the boat and peered down at the water. Thick algae covered the surface and occasional logs stuck up into the air. The darkness of the rotting wood contrasted sharply with the moss green of everything else. It looked like a lost and dying world that we had accidentally intruded upon. I shivered and turned to look at Dr. Martin.

"This place gives me the creeps," I said.

Dr. Martin only grunted. He wiped at the sweat on his brow with his shirt sleeve and continued to guide the boat.

Something rustled on the bank. We all froze and listened for any other noises. Dylan slowly reached for the gun that Dr. Martin had stowed beneath a seat. When nothing else happened, we relaxed and began breathing again.

"So, we have made it this far," I observed, "now what?"

"I am taking you to the old laboratory," Dr. Martin answered. "It is where your Dad was working, and I am hoping that we can find a clue there."

"You mean you don't know exactly where Dad is," Dylan asked. "You are just guessing?"

Dr. Martin raised his eyebrow and looked at Dylan like he was incompetent. "I am doing my best, okay. Unless you want to lead this expedition and try to figure everything out, I suggest you let me do what I can do."

"Yes, sir," Dylan said stiffly.

I sat on my hands and forced myself to not say something nasty to Dr. Martin. He could make a person really mad.

Just then Dr. Martin turned the boat into shore and turned off the engine. "We are here," he announced.

Dylan and I hopped out and helped drag the boat onto the bank. I wiped the mud off my hands and scanned our surroundings. Placing my hands on my hips, I snorted. We were standing in the middle of the nowhere. My expectations had been far from met.

Dylan walked over and joined me. "We're here," he said.

I gave a half nod. "At least we will be able to see Dad soon. Are you excited?"

"Of course," Dylan answered. He took off his shoe and dumped a pile of dirt out. "It has been almost four years since we last saw him. Do you think he will recognize us?"

"I bet that he will," I replied.

Dr. Martin had his GPS out and was taking a reading. He pointed towards the edge of the jungle and started to move in that direction. "Let's go," he called to us. "We don't have any time to waste."

Dylan and I started to follow him. "Wait, what about the boat," I asked, stopping and turning around, "should we hide it?"

"Don't worry about it," Dr. Martin said over his shoulder, "just follow me."

It seemed strange to me that Dr. Martin was not concerned about the boat. I was not sure if I trusted Dr. Martin or not. There were still a lot of unanswered questions that I had about him. I could not shake the feeling that I was missing something.

I sighed and started walking again. "I hope he knows what he is doing," I muttered to Dylan. "I do not want to get lost."

Dylan smirked, "me neither."

Dr. Martin appeared to be confident as he led us through the jungle, but I had figured out a while ago that he was confident in everything he did. I looked at the trees and plant life around me. Everything looked damp, sticky, and exactly the same. Sighing, I sped up my pace to keep up with the long strides of Dr. M and Dylan.

We marched through the underbrush, clearing the path that we took. Several times I scratched my arms on the branches that sprung back and hit me. Dylan picked up a walking stick to clear the spider webs away with. I let him walk first and followed close behind.

I had to keep telling myself that I was doing this for Dad. I pictured him sitting in a chair on the other side of this jungle waiting for me; all I had to do was make it there to him. However, it still took every ounce of my will power to step over one more tangled mess of roots, slap at another mosquito, and keep going.

Dr. Martin noticed my struggle and slowed down to wait for me. "Doing okay," he asked.

I wiped my brow off with my shirt sleeve. "What does it look like to you," I panted. "Can't you tell I do this sort of thing everyday for fun?" My voice dripped with sarcasm and complaint.

Dylan had also stopped to join us. "She's right," he said, "this is a new experience for both of us and we aren't prepared. I am dying for drink of water right now."

Dr. Martin studied both of us. His face twisted into a hopeless look. "I'm sorry, but we don't have any choice but to keep going. We lost all of our supplies in the plane crash or I would offer you a water bottle. Do you think that you guys can last for just a little longer?"

I slumped and shook my head no. Dylan had to be the hero though, and he answered with renewed energy in his voice, "Of course we can."

I rolled my eyes. "Well then which one of you big tough guys plans on giving me a piggy back ride?" I demanded. "There is no way we can keep going. We are dehydrated from lack of

water, exhausted, probably suffering heat stroke, and we don't even know where we are."

"Ally," Dylan said in a sharp voice, "I'm sorry you are struggling, but we have no choice. It won't help us if we give up now. We might have some hope, though, if we keep going."

Dr. Martin leaned against the trunk of the tree to rest. For the first time I realized that he needed help also. He was an old guy and not in very good shape. I felt a twinge of regret over my whining.

"Stop fighting," he ordered. "Just be quiet for a moment." He consulted the GPS again and then changed direction. "The laboratory should be right over here, if I remember correctly."

"We will keep our eyes open," I told Dr. Martin. "You just keep right on leading us forward."

## Chapter 7

Dr. Martin was the first to see the building and he eagerly called for us to hurry up and come see. It was not much, only a square cement building in the middle of the jungle, but it excited everyone and lifted our spirits.

"This is the laboratory that your Dad was working at," Dr. Martin said. "I guess that the government shut it down."

"Why would they shut it down," I asked. "Was it because of Cecil?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dr. Martin replied. "I don't know where else to look for your father though. Let's take a look around and see if we can figure out what to do next."

I nodded and began inspecting the building. I was curious to find out more about the place where my dad had worked. I walked around to another side, searching for the entrance. There were not any windows or other openings that I could see.

I glanced back at Dr. Martin and Dylan. They were busy searching a different side. A sudden clicking noise behind me made me spin around in fear. I scanned the trees closest to me. I did not see anything, but my imagination started to create unseen villains everywhere. Goosebumps appeared on my arms and legs. I shivered and hurried back to join the others. This place was spooky.

"Hey," Dylan called out, "I found a door over here." Dr. Martin and I joined him. The door opened easily. There was a flight of stairs leading down and a metal banister attached to the wall.

"I'll go first," Dr. Martin said. "Stay right behind me."

On the back of the door was a large caution sign with the radioactive symbol. I pointed it out to Dylan. He nodded and reached out to touch it.

"Something big was being worked on here," he observed, "something dangerous and top secret."

We followed Dr. Martin down the flight of stairs to a larger room. The light still worked when we flipped it on. I walked around the room. So this was where my dad had worked.

"What do we do now," I asked. "We still have to find where Dad is."

Dr. Martin thought a moment as he slowly turned in a circle. "How about we split up and explore. Nobody leave the building and yell if you need help. We need to find a clue to what happened and where the other scientists went."

I explored a small hallway to the left. Several rooms branched off and each one looked interesting to explore. I started with the first room on the right.

Dr. Martin entered the room behind me. I spun towards him in surprise. I had thought that we were splitting up to look.

"Found anything?" he asked casually. He wandered around the room as he spoke, looking at various things.

He made me feel like a mouse being trapped by a cat. Shaking my head, I kept turning so that I had my face towards him. "No, not yet," I answered. "What about you? Have you found something?"

"No," he sighed, "and I don't think that we will. Cecil is much too careful to leave any evidence of what he is doing just lying around. I think that I know where he is located, though, and we will try there next. But first I wanted to talk to you."

I did not say anything, but let Dr. Martin keep talking.

"You want to find your father and take him home, right?" he asked. He stopped moving around and came to stand next to me.

I nodded. "Yes, that has always been my goal."

Dr. Martin gave a small smile. "What about the notebook? You know that your father is not going to give up on this project if he can still work on it. If you give him the notebook, he might go back for a little while, but then he will want to finish his research."

"Okay," I said, hesitating, "and what is your point?"

"Well I was thinking that if he did not have to the notebook to work on, then he would have no choice but to give up on it."

I stared at him confused. "You want me to give you the notebook, don't you? Is that why you agreed to help Dylan and me?"

Dr. Martin glanced up at the ceiling and sighed. "No, I agreed to help you because your dad and I used to be friends. Now I'm trying to help you achieve your goal."

Slowly I reached into my bag and slid out the notebook. I did not want to give it to Dr. Martin. It was not even mine to give to him. What he had said about Dad, though, was true. He would never stop a project if he could still work on it.

"I promise to keep it safe," Dr. Martin added, "and if you ever wanted it back, I would give it to you."

Knowing that Dr. Martin had caught me in a weak position, I struggled with what to do. My mind told me that I needed to keep the notebook; my heart told me that I needed to do whatever it took to make sure my Dad came home.

"I don't know," I began. "Do you promise to give it back if I wanted it?"

His face broke into a small smile. "Of course," he said, "I promise."

Without trusting my decision, I handed the notebook to him. He accepted it almost greedily. "You are doing the right thing for your father," he told me.

"I hope so," I whispered. I left the room and journeyed farther down the hallway, thinking. Shaking myself from my thoughts, I picked a different room to search. "Keep your focus on finding your father," I repeated to myself. I wandered through several small laboratory rooms and down another small hallway.

I had the strange feeling that someone was watching me. I scanned the room behind my back. Nothing registered out of place, but I still could not shake the creepy feeling.

Shivering, I turned and wandered into what looked like a storage room. Metal filing cabinets lined three of the walls, on the fourth wall hung empty shelves. I opened up a random cabinet out of curiosity. To my surprise, several boxes of glass jars sat on the bottom shelves.

I pulled one out and examined it. The lids of the jars were labeled with different chemical names. Some of them I could recognize from my own experience in labs. One of the names stood out from the rest, 6 Molar Hydrochloric acid. It

was one of the chemicals I had used in my project for the competition.

"The competition I never got to enter," I thought with a bit of regret, "all that hard work for nothing." I picked up the jar and held it up thoughtfully. The orange-yellow liquid reflected the overhead light and created a pattern on the wall.

"Keep away from anything zinc or watch out," I commented with a grin. "This is a fun chemical."

I sat in a moment of debate, tapping my fingers on the side of the box. Then decisively I slid the jar into my carry-on bag. "I don't think anyone will miss it," I reasoned, "and it might come in handy later." I placed the box back into the cabinet and closed the door, leaving it like I had found it.

As I turned around, the sound of crashing glass resounded from nearby. It startled me, causing me to jump in fright. I started running to go find Dylan. "This place is creepy," I wailed softly to myself.

Dylan stood in the front room, looking at the row of beakers he had knocked to the floor. "Hey sis," he called, "I am glad to see you. I thought that everybody had left me." He

kicked at the glass shards with his sneaker. "By the way, have you seen Dr. Martin?"

"Um, no," I replied thinking back, "well, not recently."

Dylan circled the room and peered down the long hallway. "I think that he has gone missing," he observed.

A sudden thought flashed across my mind. I had given Dr. Martin the notebook, what if he had taken off with it? "Not good," I gasped. "We have to find him."

Dylan held up his finger to be quiet and we both listened. The silence of the place became increasingly evident. After a few moments Dylan spoke up again, "Ally, nobody is here except us."

I officially started panicking. Why had I ever trusted Dr. Martin? Why had I listened to Dr. Martin's smooth talk? Why had I not kept the notebook? Because I was scared that I would fail to bring my father home. The cold realization settled heavily on my chest. Because I had been scared.

"What do we do now?" I asked at last. "I don't really want to stay here."

Dylan assumed the commanding role in our adventure. "We go find Cecil," he decided. "That will be where Dad is."

I nodded in agreement. "Dylan," I asked, "does it scare you that we are only two kids, half-way around the world from home, and competing for the life of our father?"

"Yeah," Dylan said, "it does, Ally, it really does."

Dylan started up the flight of stairs to the exit. "Come on," he called over his shoulder to me. "We have to keep moving."

I followed him obediently. We stepped through the door and immediately were blasted with the jungle heat. I had forgotten how humid it was outside while I had been in the laboratory.

Fanning myself I complained, "Why couldn't Cecil choose a place to hide Dad where there was at least air conditioning?"

"And vending machines," Dylan added. "Or maybe an ice cream truck."

We started walking away from the laboratory in a southerly direction. "If there were an ice cream truck," I replied, "I would hijack it to use for transportation. My feet are killing me."

I loved joking around with Dylan. He was always so much fun. When Mom had died, he had become more reserved around other people, but he was always open around me.

Without warning the sound of a gunshot erupted from the jungle. At first I froze in surprise. Dylan stood looking around, trying to figure out what had just happened.

"Dylan," I started to stammer when I saw a man dressed in black and waving a pistol running towards us. Dylan's back was turned towards him. "Ahhhhh," I screamed.

"Ally," Dylan shouted, "stop it. Calm down."

I opened my mouth to scream again, but two hands clamped around my face and pulled me backwards. I twisted around and saw that the hands belonged to another soldier. I fought against their hold, desperate to get away.

My heart raced in fear. What was going to happen? Two other soldiers had joined us and now had Dylan in their grasp.

"Take them to the truck," one of the men ordered. They started to drag us off. I stumbled along, pushed every now and then in the right direction by my captor.

After a short walk we came to a road. It looked more like a small dirt trail. A military truck was parked by the side. They forced us into the back of the vehicle. Two of the guards rode in the front and drove, the other two stayed with us.

I wondered why God had let all this happen to me. Didn't I care about Him and try to obey him. I had tried to accept my mom's death as part of His plan. I had tried to understand when my dad left and would never come back. But why did everything

still have to go wrong. It didn't feel like He was working everything out for good like He promised in the Bible.

I thought back to a conversation I had had with Dr. Martin on the flight here.

*I had asked him if he was a Christian. "No," he answered, "believing in an invisible God just doesn't work for me. But I take it that you are a Christian."*

*"Of course," I replied. "I have believed since I was 3 or 4 years old."*

*"So do you believe that God is in charge and controlling everything?" he asked.*

*I didn't answer. Where was he going with that question?*

*"It seems to me," Dr. Martin observed, "that if God cared about you and wanted you to trust Him, He should do a lot better job of watching out for you."*

*"What do you mean," I demanded.*

*"I mean that He should have taken care of your father. You trust someone who hasn't proved His worth. I don't believe that your God is capable of helping you."*

*"That is not true," I argued, "He has always been there for me."*

*"Like when?" he countered. "Name for me an example."*

I gazed up at the trees, thinking. When had God helped me? I thought back to mom's death. He had kept me from dying then, in fact, it should have been me that died, not my mom. He had provided Aunt Julie to take care of us so Dylan and I could stay together. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that even in little every day things, God had been there and I had just never acknowledged that His power was at work.

A favorite verse came to mind. Proverbs 3:5 "Trust in the Lord with your heart and lean not on your own understanding." I had trusted myself and look where I had ended up. Would it be too hard to rely on God's plan and trust the outcome to Him? He had proved over and over again that He was worthy of my trust.

I tried to pray to God a heartfelt prayer that consisted of more than just, "God, please help me." At first it was awkward and when I had finished it did not feel like anything had changed. I gave up for right then, and just sat waiting.

The truck pulled up to a stop by a small beach. We were forced to get off and then marched over to a boat. The boat was

much more sleek and modern than the one Dr. Martin had rented. In the distance I could see a larger boat.

"That must be where Cecil is," I commented to Dylan. "Maybe we will find our dad after all."

"A lot of good it is going to do us if we are also prisoners," he commented dryly.

The boat sped towards the larger ship, taking us closer to either a really bad nightmare, or else hope of being with our father.

We pulled up next to a metal ladder on the side of the boat. I climbed up it first. Another group of guards waited at the top to escort us. After Dylan and I were both on board, they surrounded us and marched us off. We went down a flight of stairs and through several rooms before arriving at a small closet.

They unlocked the door and shoved us inside. When my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, I could make out the figure of a man sitting against the far wall.

"Hello," came the tired voice, "who are you?"

I would have recognized that voice anywhere. "Dad," I gasped, "is that you?" I ran towards him.

He stood up and met me with a hug. "Ally," he cried, "I can't believe you are here. And Dylan, you are here too. It has been so long since I have seen you guys." He laid his head on our shoulders and started crying.

I cried along with him. It had been four years since we had said good-bye. Even Dylan had tears rolling down his face. "We found you," I kept repeating over and over.

When we finally stopped, all of us were emotionally drained. "Thank you God!" I shouted to no one in particular.

Dylan ruined our happy reunion with a dark cloud. "Now all we have to do is escape," he commented.

"Right," I replied. I bit my lip in indecision. Should I tell Dad about losing the notebook? He deserved to know I decided. "We also need to get the notebook back," I admitted.

At first Dad looked worried, then he forced a smile. "The notebook is not as important as you two. I have come to realize that lately. Now tell me how you guys came to be here."

We related our story, beginning with the note that had informed us he was dead. When we reached the part about Dr. Martin, Dad's lips pressed together into a thin line. His face became hard and he looked almost angry.

"Never trust that snake with anything," he advised. "He has already tried to sell the nuclear fusion secret to Cecil on his own."

With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I told him about giving the notebook to Dr. Martin. Dad did not look happy, but he was not mad at me. He was upset with Dr. Martin and his lies.

After awhile, we fell silent. Each one of us was thinking our own thoughts. Outside of the small room remained quiet. I studied the ceiling, wondering if there was any way to escape that way.

"Do the doors have automatic locks," Dylan asked. He stood up to look. "Score," he announced. "Now does anybody have an electronic device that I could destroy? I might be able to program the door to unlock."

"That sounds really far-fetched to me," I told him.

Dad joined Dylan at the door. "I think I have a palm pilot," he offered, "though the cell phone and internet don't work where we are."

"It will be perfect," Dylan said. He took the palm pilot and retreated to a corner to fiddle with it.

I sat and talked with Dad. I loved being able to just talk with him and catch up. It was a special time.

Finally Dylan crowed in triumph. Taking his gismo over to the door, he keyed in a command. A faint click rewarded all of us.

"Good job, Dylan," Dad said with a smile. "You did it."

"I am impressed," I told him. "I did not think that you could do it." I went over to the door and smiled at him. "Now let's move. I want to go home."

Dylan tucked the gismo into the pocket of his cargo pants. "Right," he replied, "we still have to be back before Aunt Julie does."

He eased open the door and peeked out to check if the coast was clear. Motioning us to follow, he stepped out into the empty room.

## Chapter 9

Dad led the way down the empty hallway. He moved with caution, constantly stopping and listening for other noises. None of us had ever been in this part of the ship, so going in this direction had been a gamble.

The boat felt bigger than it had looked from the outside. Everything was modern, sleek, and very high tech. I wondered how much money it had cost and who was backing Cecil with funds.

I followed as close behind Dylan as I could without running into him. Every few seconds I heard a sound that would send shivers down my back. I kept imagining that a thug was walking towards us and would capture us again.

"Please Dad, figure out where to go and get us off the ship before something else goes wrong," I thought. I had found my father and was ready to go back home.

A voice in the back of my head reminded me that I still needed to recover the lost notebook. I regretted giving it to Dr. Martin. He had taken it and disappeared without warning. Now he had all of the secrets that my father had worked on for so long, dangerous secrets that no one should know. Somehow, I had to get it back.

Dylan started walking faster. I quickened my pace to catch up. He looked over his shoulder at me. "Come on," he mouthed.

I obeyed without hesitation. There was no way that they were going to leave me behind. "What is it," I whispered in the quietest tone that I could. My voice still sounded too loud to me.

"I think that Dad recognizes this part," Dylan explained. His face was flushed and his eyes were wide with either excitement or fear. I grinned on the inside. Dylan was living out the adventure he had been wanting. "But don't worry about it. Just keep up and follow us," he commanded.

I dropped back behind him. It irritated me a little that he felt like he was in charge and had to help protect me. "Just be glad that you aren't doing this alone," I reminded myself. "It is much better to have Dylan around than nobody at all."

We came to a dead end in the hallway. Dad halted and turned around slowly. He looked back at us with a hopeless look. "I'm sorry guys," he said, "I thought that I could find the way, but evidently I can't." He raked his fingers through his hair. Closing his eyes in thought, he stood there for a few moments. "I don't know what to do," he admitted at last.

I gave him a hug, relaxing into his arms and staying there for a few moments. "Its okay dad," I told him, "we are all in this together. Remember what mom used to say to us when we were scared."

A shadow of sadness passed over his eyes. "Yes," he said his voice husky, "wasn't it Psalm 56 something."

"It was Psalm 56:3," I reminded him. He nodded and together we quoted it. "What time I am afraid, I will trust in you." "We need to trust that God will help us figure it out."

Dylan my hand and I took my dad's hand. "Let's go," Dylan said.

Dad led us back to a door we had passed earlier an. He paused before entering, checking to make sure the way was clear. He cut through the room and opened a door on the other side.

We followed him, unsure of what he wanted us to do. He held up his palm in a stop sign and then quickly motioned for us to back up. We took slow steps backward out of the room, trying not to make any noise.

Suddenly I ran into somebody. I managed to stifle my scream, but not my panic. My body tensed and a fresh course of adrenaline raced through me. "Oh no," I thought, "We are busted." I turned around slowly, expecting the worst. Dr. Martin was behind me, and he was not alone. Three guards were surrounding him; one of them held a gun to his head.

My fear gave way to shock at seeing Dr. Martin. Despite the gravity of the situation, I let my temper gain control of me. "Well," I said to Dr. Martin in a clipped tone, "nice of you to show up again." I would have said more, in fact I had a lot more I wanted to say, but Dylan had grabbed my hand and was racing away in the opposite direction. I stumbled at first and then gained my footing.

Dad shouted at us to hurry, but I did not need his reminder. The men were recovering from their initial surprise

and two of them had given chase. We followed Dad back into the room and kept going through the opposite doors. Whatever he had not wanted to meet the first time was forgotten, there was a more immediate threat behind us.

We found ourselves in another room; this one was decorated as a lounge. A group of men burst into the room in front of us. One of them was shouting into a walkie-talkie. They pointed their guns at us.

We stopped, unsure of our next course of action. The guards that had been chasing us entered the room behind us. Their guns were also leveled at us. Dad held up his hands in surrender. Dylan and I followed his example.

"Please God," I prayed, "now would be a good time to show your power. Please help us out of this."

The men surrounded us, holding us at gunpoint. The last guard and Dr. Martin joined the group. Dr. Martin avoided my gaze and instead stared intently at a picture hanging on the wall. I looked at Dad and Dylan, hoping for some guidance, but they could only stare back at me with worried eyes.

The two leaders held a whispered conversation. They pointed at us and issued a command. Then we were led out of the room, like prisoners to an execution.

They took us to a large meeting room. The room had deep maroon chairs surrounding a long grayish-blue table. Cecil sat at one end of the table. He was talking on a cell and barely glanced up when we entered.

They lined us up along a wall and forced us to wait. One of the guards approached Cecil to talk with him. Cecil finished his conversation first and hung up the phone. He crossed his arms while he listened to the guard's report.

My heart was racing in suspense. I could not tell if Cecil looked like he was in good or bad mood. I swallowed nervously and shrunk back behind my dad. I tried to think of a way out of this mess, but my mind refused to concentrate. All I could think about was everything I wished that I had done in my life.

I looked over at the others standing with me. Dylan looked white and I could see his hands trembling. I wished that I could tell him to stay strong. Dr. Martin kept wetting his lips with his tongue. His face glistened with sweat. Dad looked visibly frightened and upset, maybe even desperate.

Cecil dismissed the guard and then walked over to where we stood. He paced in front of us and examined us closely. He finally stopped in front of me.

I thought that I was going to have a heart attack. I tried to be defiant and brave, but I was too scared. I could see the outline of a gun beneath Cecil's jacket.

Cecil glanced down at me and then addressed Dad. "So you thought that you could escape from my ship?" he asked. "A hopeless plan if you ask me."

Dad just stood there glaring at him. Cecil shrugged and then turned to Dr. Martin. A sneer of triumph spread across his face. "You have caused me a lot of headaches these last few days," he said, "little rat that you are. You thought that you could get away with taking my power, but in the end it looks like I am going to win anyways."

Dr. Martin was shaking, but he stayed silent. Cecil gloated over Dr. Martin's obvious discomfort, then his eyes turned hard and his sneer disappeared. "I want the notebook, Dr. Martin," he said in an icy voice.

"No," Dr. Martin shouted. His face turned a deep shade of red. "You said I could have it, that all you wanted was

Michael. You promised me. I fulfilled my part and helped you, now you have to fulfill your part of the bargain. I did everything you asked." He was rambling out words in defense of himself.

I stared at Dr. Martin horrified; I could not believe that I had ever trusted this guy. He had been working for Cecil all along and I had missed it. I felt like an idiot.

"Well the plans have changed," Cecil replied, "and they no longer include you." He pulled out his gun and calmly clicked the safety off. He raised it and pointed it at Dr. Martin, "Now, the notebook please."

Everything was happening so fast that I was having a hard time following what was happening. With a sinking feeling, I realized that Dr. Martin still had the notebook I had given him. My gaze swung from Cecil to Dr. Martin and back again.

Dr. Martin was trembling like a leaf. Ever so slowly, he pulled the notebook out from under his shirt where he had hidden it. He clutched it in both hands. At first it looked like he might still resist Cecil, but then he held it out to him.

"No," I gasped. Cecil was the last person on this planet that should have the notebook. I could only begin to imagine

what he would do with the information that the notebook contained. Dr. Martin had only told me a small part of what kind of bomb could be built using that information, but it was enough for me to know that I did not want Cecil to have that kind of power.

Cecil kept the gun trained on Dr. Martin and motioned for one of the guards to take the notebook. Then, without a pause, he shot Dr. Martin in the head. Dr. Martin's body jerked backward and fell to the floor.

My gut also felt like it had been shot. I was reeling from what I had just witnessed. Cecil had the notebook and Dr. Martin was dead. And it had all happened so fast.

Cecil wore a triumphant grin on his face. "That felt good," he commented. He turned to the other guards and issued a command. "Deal with these three," he said motioning towards us. "I don't need them anymore; I have the notebook now. And clean up the mess in here." Without a backwards glance he stalked out of the room.



## Chapter 10

One of the guards left the room. He returned in a couple of moments with a body bag to put Dr. Martin in. None of them spoke as they went about their grisly chore. For the most part, the guards ignored us and just left us standing there.

The smell of the blood mixed with bleach was making me feel nauseated. I slid down against the wall to a sitting position and rested my head between my knees. Everything had gone wrong. All I wanted was to pretend that none of this was happening to me.

"Why, Lord," I moaned, "I thought that I had trusted you." My thoughts were in turmoil. A cascade of future scenarios paraded through my head. Cecil did not need us any more and wanted us dealt with. How would they kill us? And I did not

even want to consider the thought that Cecil was now in possession of Dad's notebook. The one good thing that I could think of was that I would already be dead when Cecil began to destroy the world.

Dylan sat down beside me. He did not say anything, but just stared vacantly with wide, scared eyes. This pale, trembling individual was a whole different Dylan than the Dylan that had come here with a 'go get them' attitude. We both knew that we were defeated, and the hopelessness was eating away any sense of purpose that we had felt earlier.

When the guards had managed to remove most of the mess, they focused their attention and guns back on us. "Up," they ordered in heavily accented English.

I was not given a chance to obey before they strode over and hauled me to my feet. I winced from the tight grip of their hands on my arm. They dragged us out of the conference room and into the hallway.

"Look at our little funeral parade," I thought in gloomy despair.

We walked towards the front of the ship and then turned left. We descended a small flight of steps and turned left again. That's when we found it.

The guard in front stopped in mid-step and let out a yelp of surprise. He backed up into the other men behind them. The guard clutching my arm pushed forward to see what was wrong. I was pulled stumbling behind him.

When we reached the first guard, I looked down and gasped. A dead corpse lay stretched out across the floor. "What in the world," I whispered to myself.

The guard holding me let out a stream of curses. By now the whole group knew what was wrong. The men exchanged looks and started muttering. I tried to see Dad, but somebody was standing in the way. Dylan remained motionless by the wall. Immediately behind him was another door.

One of guards knelt down and carefully inspected the body. "It was Joe," he announced, "somebody shot him from behind."

"Who would shoot Joe," a man demanded. "It wasn't any of us."

"Cecil, that's who," another answered, "I told you he is going mad. He hasn't been right since we came here to the

island." His voice held a dangerous hint of rebellion and anger.

"Shut up," said the leader. He started to say something else in a foreign language when he was interrupted by a gunshot. The bullet whizzed over our heads and buried itself in the wall.

"Aaah," I screamed. It was like finding yourself in a horror movie and everything had to go wrong.

Immediately the guards dropped, pulling us down with them. Several of the men held up their weapons and aimed them down the hallway. They hesitated to return fire since they had no idea who it was or where it was. Another gunshot was fired. The men shot back, but there was no enemy that they could see to shoot at.

The guards had already been spooked by the dead body, now they started to panic. More bullets whooshed past us. One of them hit the man next to Dylan. The guard who had been bad-mouthing Cecil earlier slid backwards and then stood and ran up the stairs. "No way am I staying here," he yelled back. "I told you he was going mad." Several of the others looked around and then followed him.

The open mutiny among the men surprised me. I had pictured Cecil as the kind of man that would keep strict control over everything. The guards thought that something was wrong with him, though. And it had started when he had begun searching for the notebook.

The leader began shouting and cursing at the disappearing men. He lifted his gun to fire after them. "Back," he started to order when the guy next to him was shot. The rest of the men scattered.

In the confusion I made my way towards Dylan. He had disappeared from where I had seen him last. I was about to run up the stairs when a hand clamped around my mouth and pulled me into through the door I had seen earlier. I struggled against the grip and let out muffled cries.

"Shhh, Ally," a voice whispered into my ear. The hot breath against my neck made me shiver. "It's me, Dylan. I'm going to let go of you, but you have to stay silent and not give away our hiding place. Dad's with me too." He slowly released his hold on me.

I turned to face Dylan, but the room was too dark to make out his features. "Hey," I whispered. "One of these days you are going to have to think of a better way to attract my

attention. If you keep surprising me like that, I am going to experience a heart attack.

"Ally, Dylan, over here," dad called to us from right. We made our way towards him, being careful to not run into any furniture or other obstacles. He opened a door to reveal a staircase. A thin strip of light could be seen at the top. "Look what I found," Dad announced proudly, "our route to freedom." He gestured with forward with his arm and gave a slight bow. "After you two," he said.

I reached for Dylan's hand, and together we started up the stairs. With my free hand I clutched the small handrail on the wall. Dad closed the door behind us with a quiet click and then hurried to join us.

"Almost to freedom," I thought to myself. "Just up this flight of stairs, to a lifeboat, and then ...." I paused in mid thought, "What would we do after we were off of Cecil's ship? Sail around in a little lifeboat until some other ship picked us up?" I glanced back at Dad. I hoped that he had a plan because I was lost for ideas.

We were almost to the top when we heard a series of loud crashes and bangs. We froze and listened for their source. It sounded like the room to the left of the stairs.

"What do you think is happening," Dylan asked in a whisper.

"I don't want to know," I replied. "Let's just get off this boat and forget all about it. I have had my fill of excitement."

"Cecil is losing his control," Dad observed. "The search for the secrets in the notebook has really messed with his head and driven him to make rash moves." Dad's voice had taken on a tone of regret when he mentioned the notebook.

I looked down at my sneakers dug my toe into the side of the step. It was my fault that his notebook was lost.

"Let's go," Dylan said as he started back up the stairs. "I am tired of waiting around here." I nodded and started moving again.

The door at the top of the stairs opened out onto a small deck. Two or three life preservers were leaning against the wall. Our object of conquest, a small lifeboat, was lying upside down by the railing. Together, Dad and Dylan managed to right the lifeboat and lower it into the water. I was worried that someone would hear the noise that we were making, but no one came to investigate.

The sun was glaring down on us and the humidity was almost unbearable. I pulled my hair up into a ponytail in an effort to stay cooler.

With the boat in the water, Dad handed out a life preserver to each of us. "In case something happens," he said, "I don't want one of us to drown."

I stiffened at the word drown. It brought regret and fear whenever I heard it.

I accepted the life preserver from Dad and stood at the railing as Dylan descended the ladder down into the boat. I let Dad go next. The boat wobbled some as Dad tried to balance standing up.

"Come on, Ally," he called. "We are just waiting for you."

I hesitated on the edge, looking down. The boat looked even smaller in the water than it had on the deck of the ship.

"Don't worry," Dad assured me, "the boat is seaworthy and it should hold all of us easily." He proved his point by making it rock back and forth in the water a couple of times.

I was not primarily worried about the boat, though, or even about the sea. I was worried about what I was choosing to leave behind in Cecil's hands, the notebook.

The life preserver felt like it weighed a ton in my hand. I shifted it to my shoulder. Dad and Dylan were still waiting for me to join them in the lifeboat below.

Escape! It sounded so good, to be free from Cecil and be able to go back home with my Dad. Yet, as I stared at the life preserver, I knew that I could not do it. I looked back towards the door we had just come through. The "Caution, Radioactive" sign showed up bright orange through the afternoon haze. It was my fault that Cecil had the notebook.

I held back a sob as I let the empty life preserver fall to the water below. It made a loud splash as it hit against the water. Then it stayed there, calmly bobbing up and down in the waves.

"Ally, what do you think that you are doing?" Dad asked. "Hurry up and come down here. We need to get away before somebody sees us. Don't just stand there."

Dylan looked up, puzzled. His eyes had a strange look in them as they met mine. Then he gave me a sad smile and nodded his head once at me. At least he understood what I was feeling.

For a brief moment I thought again of jumping down and joining them. Then I half-waved, whispered a silent good-bye,

and turned towards the door. I would do what Mom would have been proud of.

## Chapter 11

I made my way back down the stairs. My feet fell with slow and heavy steps. I should have been more careful, but my mind was on the two most important things in the world to me, my dad and my brother.

"Please Lord; help them to escape safely. And please help me to find Dad's notebook. Don't let me die until I have destroyed it and Cecil can no longer use its secrets." I finished my prayer with a soft 'Amen'.

I reached the end of the stairwell and was about to open the door at the bottom when the sound of quiet talking made me pause. I pressed my ear up against the wood to try and listen. It sounded like three different men from their voices.

"1613. We go in at 1617. Remember the plan and stick with it. We don't want any publicity from this stunt," said a hoarse voice. The sound of it grated on my ears.

"Is Joe in place?" asked a younger voice. "The plan won't go off without him."

"He should be soon," answered the first one. "He knows to run it just like we did in practice."

"It is too bad that we were unable to kill all of the guards. Now they know something is up," a third voice broke in. It was definitely a bass. I heard him sigh and lean against something.

"It doesn't matter. We will be in and out with the notebook before they even realize what is going on," the first one replied.

I almost gave away my hiding spot with a cry of surprise. I clutched my hands over my mouth. They were looking for the notebook too. But who were they and why did they want it? How did they even know about it? I pressed my ear up against the wood again to try and hear more.

"Two more minutes," the young voice commented.

"Just be patient," the bass warned. "Old Man Hickman wants this job to be done perfectly. We have to give Joe time to get to the room. We will meet him at 1632."

"Hickman, Hickman?" I wondered. I racked my brain trying to figure out where I had heard the name before.

"Let's go," the first voice rasped.

Their footsteps faded into the distance. I could faintly hear a door being opened and closed, and then they were gone. I waited a few more moments and then crept into the empty room. I made my way towards the hallway where the corpse had been found. Checking to make sure the coast was clear, I proceeded onward.

"Hurry," I kept reminding myself. "You have to find the notebook before anybody else does."

The stairs lay next in my intended path of travel. I took them three at a time. A sense of urgency had replaced any thought of caution. At the top I paused and looked both ways down the hallway. "Eeeny-meeny-miny-mo," I chanted, "which way should I go." I chose left and kept going.

Footsteps sounded up ahead. I froze. My heart started beating in a wild, uncontrolled manner. I could not let them see me. There was no where to hide, so I turned around and

headed in the opposite direction. Pausing briefly I slipped off my shoes. My socks would not make the dull thumps that my tennis shoes were making.

I pushed open the first door I found. It was an exit door to a large deck. Slipping outside I let it fall shut behind me.

A door opened at the other end and Cecil stepped out. I pushed myself flat against the wall. "No, not now," I pleaded silently.

He seemed preoccupied with something though and did not even glance up. I waited until I was sure he was gone and then sprinted across. The room Cecil had just left looked like the captain's cabin. I entered and shut the door behind me.

"At last," I whispered in triumph. "I only hope that I am not here too late." The three guys had said they were meeting with Joe at 1632. What time was it?

A small clock on the wall read 4:27 p.m. "You have to hurry," I told myself, "something is going to be happening in less than five minutes and you have to find the notebook and get out of here."

I glanced around looking for the best place to start. "Man, this place is as wrecked as my room," I complained. "I am never going to find anything."

Walking over to a large desk, I decided to start there. A great number of papers and folders littered the top. There was also a large tray of snacks. My stomach grumbled at the thought of food. I couldn't remember when I had last eaten.

"Don't mind if I do," I announced to the goodies. I selected a chocolate chip cookie and ate half of it in one bite. "Mmm," I said, "Thank you Lord for chocolate."

Turning my attention to the papers on the desk, I rifled through them quickly. The notebook was nowhere to be seen. Next I focused on the drawers. One after another I pulled out binders and folders. None of them were the right one.

I pulled out still another thick white notebook. Flipping it open, I scanned the contents quickly. A broad smile spread across my face. "There you are," I whispered in triumph. I closed it and then kissed it like a champion kisses the trophy he just won. Hugging it to my chest, I stood up. "Now I just have to figure out what to do with you."

I heard the door open behind me. Looking up I could see the reflection of Cecil in the glass of the window. "Shoot," I muttered.

"I see you have helped yourself to a thorough search of my office," Cecil commented dryly. "Find what you were looking for?"

I forced myself to turn around slowly and face him. "Um, no," I managed to squeak. "I just saw your plate of cookies and had to help myself to one. Anyways, they taste great and I would love to stay and chat, but I need to ..." I let my voice trail off. We both knew why I was in there.

Cecil took a step forward and let the door close behind him. He flipped on an overhead light and peered at me. His look was inquisitive and amused, but behind it I could still see the keenness of a snake. "I must say that you are difficult to keep one's eye on. You keep disappearing and popping up in strange places. Where are you father and brother this time? Did they leave you behind?"

I squeezed the notebook to my chest and just looked at him for a few moments.

"I see that they did," Cecil concluded from my silence, "how loyal of them."

Unable to ignore the slur on the character of my family, I responded. "I came back on my own, Cecil; now get off of my family."

His eyebrows went up in a mocking way. "My, my, aren't we defensive. But I have to wonder why. If my father abandoned me for five years, I wouldn't care about him anymore. If he doesn't want to be a part of my life, there is no need for me to worry about his."

My jaw dropped open in disbelief. This guy was so heartless. "Well that is because you don't care about anybody but yourself. My family means a lot to me and nothing will ever be able to change that. Nothing."

Cecil shrugged his shoulders. Obviously my passionate outburst had no affect on him. "That is between you and your dad. But," he paused and nodded towards the notebook I was holding, "that is a problem between us. I can't let you leave with it, so if you will be a good girl and give it back, I would be much obliged."

"Forget it," I shouted. "You want it so that you can show just how heartless and uncaring you really are. You would kill millions of innocent people to get what you want. Well, I am not going to let you do that. You are going to have to kill me before you can have this notebook."

"Brave words from a defenseless little girl," Cecil sneered. "You know that I would not hesitate to shoot you. So what is your plan? Is a guardian angel going to come and rescue you?" He snorted and pulled out his gun from his holster. "I'm afraid you have no other choice Ally."

I could see my options were quickly narrowing. This half-crazed man was right about one thing, though; he would not be bothered by my death. An idea came to mind, but I was not sure if I could pull it off. Shifting the notebook to my left arm, I reached into my bag with my free hand. "Please still be in there," I prayed silently.

Out loud I said, "So, if I gave you the notebook, would you let me go free. Or are you going to kill me anyways."

"We might be able to work something out," Cecil responded. From the tone of his voice I could tell that he was lying. He walked over to the window and started talking about some kind of deal he would make with me. I did not waste my time listening.

Working quickly while his back was turned, I opened the bottle I had stolen from the old laboratory. Then I pulled out the strips of zinc that had been leftover from my science fair experiment. I dropped them in one at a time.

Cecil turned and noticed what I was doing. "What in the ...?" he asked surprised.

I held the jar up in front of me. "6 Molar Hydrochloric acid," I stammered, "and zinc. You know how explosive they are. Let me go or I'll blow them up."

At first Cecil looked shaken, but then he started to laugh. "You don't even have a way to set light them. And you would not blow your own self up."

I stared at him with hard eyes. "Watch me," I dared.

He started to move forward. I turned and reached into the ashtray behind me for the cigarette. I was gambling that the cigarette was still hot enough to light my little bomb. Cecil tried to grab my hand; instead he knocked into the jar, spilling some the contents to the floor. I ducked behind the desk chair and held the cigarette over the opening of the jar.

At first nothing happened. Then the hydrogen caught on fire. I dropped the cigar into the jar and threw it at Cecil's

face. The glass exploded into pieces, momentarily stunning him. I raced for the door and threw it open. Running out onto the deck, I looked for a place to hide.

Suddenly the ship was rocked by an explosion from below. I fell forward onto my hands, losing my grip on the notebook. It slid across the floor of the deck. "No," I gasped. I struggled to my feet and was about to go after it when there was a second explosion.

In the next few moments, all I could see were flashes of orange. The ship was ripped apart. Third and fourth explosions erupted.

My body was thrown against what was left of the railing and then kept going. I could feel myself falling downwards. "Dear Jesus," I heard myself screaming. Then I hit the water with a slap.

## Chapter 12

My arms struggled against the water. My feet were pulled out from under me by the current and I sunk beneath the surface. The salt water stung the inside of my nose and mouth, and burned its way down to my lungs. Strands of hair whipped across my face. One of my legs felt dead and heavy.

I had gave up struggling to stay afloat and now just drifted down. It was sort of peaceful. From far off I could hear the sound of booming and frequent splashes. I was drowning. Flashbacks from the night of my mother's death scrolled through my mind.

*I had been swimming when I reached a part of the river that had a strong downward current. I started yelling and screaming*

for help because I was not strong enough to fight it. Mom was the only one nearby. She swam to help me and managed to pull me out of the direct current. I immediately started heading for shore. When I could safely stand up in the water, I looked back for Mom. She was still out there, caught. "Mom," I yelled. I was too scared to go back again and try to help her. "Ally, go get help," she cried out. I turned to obey. I kept looking back but could no longer see her. "Mom, Mom," I kept calling. Panicked, I ran to the boat house where we were staying.

I came back with help as soon as I could, but I knew that it was too late. Desperate to do anything I plunged back into the river...

Somebody grabbed me around me around my chest and started pulling on me with jerky motions. They were keeping from looking my mother. Using the last of my strength I fought back. I was weak from lack of oxygen, and alarm bells were starting to sound in my head. "No," I tried to scream, but more water rushed into my mouth. We reached the surface none too soon.

"No," I kept yelling, "let me go. I have to find Mom. She needs help. You have to let me go to her." I feebly beat at the arms still holding me.

"Ally calm down," my rescuer ordered. "It's me, Dad. I've got you. You are safe now."

My mind was trapped in a panic mode. "Mom," I called, "Mom. I have to go find Mom. You don't understand; it's my fault. I never should have left her. I have to help her. Please."

"What are you talking about?" Dad asked. "Ally, Mom isn't here. It is you that I'm worried about."

Slowly I gave up fighting and my thoughts returned to the present. Crying, I clung to Dad's shoulder.

*Mom's body turned up the next day about 3 miles downstream. I had never told anybody why Mom had been in the river. I felt guilty because it was my fault that she had drowned. It should have been me.*

Dad grabbed a piece of floating debris to support us with. He held onto it with one arm and onto me with the other. The ocean pulled us farther and farther away from the scene of wreckage.

"Ally," Dad said calming me down, "it's okay. You are safe now."

"It's not okay," I whispered. "It's my fault. I'm so sorry Dad, I should have told you long ago."

I do not think that Dad understood what I was meaning. "It's not your fault," he answered, "I should never have even made that notebook. If anything, it is my fault that all of this happened."

I started to cry again. Between sobs I managed to somehow tell the story that had been locked in my heart for six years. "I am the reason that you even went on the dumb research trip. I am the reason that our family is broken up. I am the reason all of our lives are a mess. I killed mom."

Dad listened patiently to me, and then he pulled me closer to give me a tight squeeze. "Is that what has been bothering you all these years? Oh, Ally, it is not your fault. Your mother would always have been willing to give her life to save one of ours. She did it out of love. I'm so sorry that you felt like you had to carry that burden for so many years. I love you Ally and I want you to know that I do not blame you for your mother's death. She died because of an accident. I regret that I became a bad father and let my grief take control. I allowed our family to fall apart. But all of that is in the

past, we can't change it. We can, however, start again. So, let's start by going home."

My tears became tears relief. I nodded and then buried my head onto his shoulder. "Yes," I whispered, "let's go home."

He started swimming towards the shore. I relaxed and floated along, safe in his arms. My leg hurt too much to help swim. When we were closer to shore, I spied Dylan with the motor boat that we had come here with Dr. Martin in. He started it and steered it towards us.

Dylan helped haul me aboard and then gave Dad a hand. Dad made sure that I was comfortably seated, while Dylan set the course for a larger island nearby.

"Are you okay, Ally?" Dylan asked. He came over knelt down beside me, scanning my face with his eyes. Dad took control of the boat and let Dylan and I have a moment together.

My throat and mouth burned too much to reply. I focused on trying to breath and not coughing up all my insides. "What happened," I managed to slur before I passed out.

I woke up only once on our journey the nearby island, and that was to take some pain medication. Dad had managed to grab

a bag of much needed supplies from the ship before his and Dylan's escape.

When we reached the island, Dad radioed for a military helicopter to pick us up. He also requested that a paramedic be sent to take a look at the burns on my face and arms and my leg. I slept again for a couple of hours until the helicopter arrived.

Once we were all safe on the helicopter, a paramedic examined me. My face and hands were stinging and the pain in my leg had become an excruciating throb.

"You're pretty lucky," the paramedic observed. "Most people don't survive boat explosions like that." He gave me shot to help with the pain and then took another look at my leg.

"Why did the boat explode?" I asked. The little bomb I had used to distract Cecil with while I escaped could never do so much damage. So then, what had?

Dylan came over to watch what was going on and picked up on our conversation. "The boilers on the ship exploded," he explained. "Somebody blew them up on purpose with gunfire."

I was starting to become groggy from the painkiller. It was becoming harder to focus. "But that doesn't make sense," I mumbled. Dylan replied something, but I was already fading out.

The pain meds wore off in exactly two hours. I woke up feeling miserable. When I complained to the paramedic, he offered me Advil but nothing else. "We need to ask you some questions," he said, "and I need you to be alert. I understand that you are hurting, but you really don't have any serious injuries that require the use of a strong medication."

"Great," I muttered, "I feel terrible, but not terrible enough to get drugs to help with the pain." I sighed and leaned my head back. "So what do you need to know?"

"Actually, it's me that needs to ask you the questions," a second man interrupted. "My name is Dan Howe. I work for the U.S. government. Is it all right if I record your answers?"

I shrugged. "It is fine with me." I snuggled beneath the heated blanket that someone had brought. A cup of hot cocoa was shoved at me. "Thanks," I murmured

"Great." Mr. Howe took a seat opposite me and placed a mini recorder on his knee. "Mr. Parker and Dylan, I could

probably use your help also with this." They nodded and took seats where they could hear.

"Okay, let's begin," Mr. Howe started. "I already know the beginning of the story. What I need to know is what happened after Dylan and Ally were captured. Can you tell me how Dr. Martin died?"

Dylan and I began to tell our adventure. We did not leave out much between the two of us. When we came to the part where we had split up, I listened eagerly to Dylan's side of the story.

"When Ally disappeared, Dad wanted to go find her and stop her. I convinced him that it was something she needed to do. We rowed back to the island to trade boats for the one Dr. Martin had borrowed, and then went back. We arrived at the beginning of the explosions. Dad saw Ally and jumped overboard to go rescue her. After that we went to the island where you guys picked us up."

It was my turn next. I told about the conversation between the three men that I had overheard, the episode in Cecil's office, and about how I escaped. Mr. Howe was especially interested in the three men.

"Hickman," he kept repeating to himself. "Could it have been Whit Hickman that they were referring to?"

"Who is Whit Hickman," I asked. The name sounded familiar.

"Isn't he the director of CIA," Dylan guessed. "I think I remember speaking with him when we were first trying to locate Dad. I remembered that now."

Mr. Howe nodded. "But he was acting alone if he sent those three men. The CIA was ignorant of any knowledge about the notebook. Which by the way, does anybody know what happened to the notebook or to Cecil?"

I shook my head slowly. "I lost the notebook after I tripped and never saw it again. The ship started blowing up and I never saw it again." I thought a moment and then asked, "So, why did somebody blow up the boilers?"

"I think your answer lies with the three mysterious men," Mr. Howe replied. "What they hoped to accomplish by their actions, we still need to find out. I'll keep working on it, though you will probably not be told. This whole thing is pretty top secret and I will need to ask you to sign papers promising your silence in these matters."

Disappointed to not be kept in the loop, I nodded hesitantly.

"We also need to establish as a fact that the notebook is no longer in play and find out where Cecil disappeared to. The team that was sent to the explosion sight report that he, or his body, is still missing." Mr. Howe shut off the tape recorder and then left us to talk among ourselves.

"So, Dylan and Ally," Dad asked, "where do you want to go when we finally reach the States. We could go back to Aunt Julie's house or just straight home."

I looked at Dylan. We both knew what awaited us at Aunt Julie's house. "Let's go home first," I suggested.

