

# CHAPTER ONE

JUMPING out of the helicopter is my first red flag.

Well, not exactly jumping. Sliding down a knotted rope while the pilot shivers with visible nerves. Is it really too rocky to touch down? Maybe he enjoys forcing seventeen-year-old girls with zero survival skills to brave the elements. Or this place is that disturbing to him, a man who makes his living transporting people to the farthest reaches of the earth.

Standing now before the massive steel doors of Misselthwaite Labs, I fear I know the answer.

A concrete arch streaked with rust stains shelters an imposing entryway built into the side of the mountain. The structure screams of mankind's interference amid a landscape that feels somehow untouched by human hands. Boulders are lodged on either side of the arch, snow dusting their red-brown surfaces.

Snow. In April.

I pivot in a slow circle and take in the vista. Not a living plant in sight, but that's a given. Instead, otherworldly peaks of gray and brown scratch the overcast sky, lending credence to the rumor that Misselthwaite is the world's most isolated laboratory.

Shrugging off the chill that may not be due to the crisp temperature, I focus on what lies beyond the door—Craven Corporation's original research facility. The very place where the reclusive genius first synthe-

sized encodable peptides, rewriting the future of human consumption and, by some accounts, preventing a worldwide hunger crisis.

I imagine Dr. Craven and his late wife working side by side in a bright white lab. He tests the purity of his yield and his eyes light with wonder.

“I’ve done it.” His voice rings clear and strong, not yet robbed of its timbre by the accident. “Lillian, come see!” He pulls her to his workbench, his hand clasping hers with urgency and affection. Together they marvel, smile, the love of science and each other infusing the moment. Just like my parents...never would’ve done.

I shake off the daydream and approach the military-grade doors. What could this time capsule hold? Could there be a trace of *before* here? Before Dr. Craven’s accident stole his voice and son? Before the seeds lost their purity and the world lost its blooms?

With a determined huff, I flip the cover on a bio scanner. Stretching on my toes, I blink at the black bar, expecting the usual beam of blue light to scan my retinas.

Nothing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, flutter my lids, then stare at the vacant black bar until my eyes water. Still nothing. The cover shuts with an unsatisfying clink when I shove it down.

Now what?

My fist lands with a bong on the dirty metal. Twice. Three times. Dr. Craven said staff members already lived at the facility when he offered me the promotion, when we discussed my options after the funeral.

“You’ll be the youngest lab director in Craven Corporation’s history.” His synthetic tone grated on my eardrums as his automated voice box attempted to mimic human intonation. “Younger than I was when I first built Misselthwaite.”

By a few months, maybe, I had thought, but everyone knows Arch Craven was still a teenager when he founded the company that would one day feed the world.

My hands shook as I tried to sound stronger, older, more confident than I was. “Will I be the only human agent on site?” My phrasing

barely masked my real question: *Will I be alone in your forgotten mountain lab?*

He squawked. Or was that his attempt at a laugh? “No, Miss Lariczek. Misselthwaite is remote, but not unoccupied.”

Another bong to the steel door refutes his claim. Surely the staff knows of my employment, my impending arrival. Are the labs so deep within the mountain that no one can hear me?

“Open this door!” My fist connects with the metal again. “I am Marieke Lariczek. I am in charge of this facility, and I demand you let me in now!” I stomp my foot in emphasis.

Nothing.

Minutes pass with only the thin mountain air and chill breeze to acknowledge my presence.

Desperate, I skim my fingers over the door, hunting for a comm or another bio scanner, when a grinding sound sends me back several steps. With the protests of an octogenarian training for a marathon, the two doors slide apart. Not willing to waste my opportunity, I snatch my nearly forgotten suitcases, which seem to have survived their unceremonious shove from the helicopter, and cross the threshold.

A ray of sunlight illuminates a hall of gray stone. The air smells wet though no condensation collects on the rock walls.

“Hello?” My voice echoes with timidity through the dark hall, and my heavy swallow is too loud in my ears.

*You can do this, Marieke. You will take command of this facility, and perfect the synthetic lysine chain to increase protein levels and improve nutrition quality for the entire world. You were hired by Dr. Craven himself, even if it was to avoid a PR nightmare.*

Internal pep talk on loop, I stride forward, pulling my luggage along behind me. The suitcases roll with an occasional skid on the dirt-encrusted wheels, thanks to my hike from the clearing where the helicopter pilot jettisoned me.

No lights line the walls or floors, and the raw stone lacks the day-tech of modern buildings. Yet the overcast sky casts enough light through the open doors behind me that I can walk without concern. Are the doors supposed to remain ajar? Should I...?

Whirring steals my attention, and the dead-end hallway blinks to

life. Blue light cuts a man-sized rectangle in the far wall. The stone whisks away to reveal an elevator.

An occupied elevator.

“Come on now, Nora. It’s just a few boxes, old girl. You can do it, ye can.” Face angled down, the woman moves with determined steps as she marches past me. Graying brown hair is knotted at her neck in a haphazard version of my own hairstyle. She wears the blue smock and leggings of a lab tech and her thin cheeks are pink with exertion.

*What the dickens?* Struck dumb by the woman’s oblivious attitude, I can only stare as she huffs toward the open door, muttering encouragements in an accent I can’t name.

“See now, old girl, ye’ve got fifty-five minutes left on the clock. What’re you getting yerself in a bunch over?” Hands planted on her narrow—or underfed—hips, she scolds a blinking placard on the wall. One that had escaped my notice as fully as I’ve escaped hers.

Leaving my bags, I step toward the distracted woman, half afraid to make my presence known. “Fifty-five minutes for what?” The least significant of my questions pops out.

“To gather the ’livery, of course.”

“The livery?” I watch the red numbers flashing on the wall. A countdown, clearly, with fifty-three minutes and some seconds remaining.

“De-liv-er-y,” she overenunciates. “Supplies. Goods. Materi—” Her gaze finds me and she jumps back a foot. “And who d’ya think ye are?”

I want to smile, to joke that I know I’m Marieke, but I picture my mother. The way she ran the last lab she directed. The last four labs. She never joked with technicians or interns. Were she alive to witness it, she would be appalled by the unprofessionalism of this interaction so far.

I straighten to my full height, a good two inches shorter than this woman, and present my hand for her to shake. “I’m Marieke Lariczek, your new lab director. I’m sure Dr. Craven informed you of my impending arrival.”

“Dr. Craven?” Her giggle warbles like a recording of a bird’s call. “Why would he be sendin’ someone to Misselthwaite?”

My lips press together as I rein in my confusion. “Because this is his

lab, the original site of Craven Corporation. And it's now my lab, for all practical purposes." I nod at my own declaration.

"Pshhh." Tiny droplets fly from her lips, catching bits of dim sunlight through the still-open doors. "Ye can have it. For whatever purposes ye like. Heaven knows no one has touched the place in years." Her gaze jerks back to the countdown flickering on the wall. Forty-nine minutes. "Now I've got a bit of a hike ahead, so be a dear and get yerself settled." She pats my shoulder. "The lift's at the end of the hall." A tilt of her head indicates the elevator where she emerged. "Labs are on two. Kitchen on three. Beds on four."

With another shoulder pat, she's gone. Out through the doors and off to who knows where.

My stern façade melts as the countdown flashes the minutes and seconds. I stare until it drops below forty, contemplating the strangest introduction to the strangest assignment of my life.

