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Part One

Becoming Avery

“Jiu-Jitsu is for the protection of the individual, the older man, the weak, the child, the lady, and the young woman from being dominated and hurt by some bum because they don’t have the physical attributes to defend themselves. Like I never had.” Helio Gracie.

Escape the Syndicate

Detective Lovelace pulled into a dirt parking lot in the middle of nowhere, waking Pippa. “I think this is it.”

After the long car ride, Pippa eagerly stepped out of the car and stretched. She smelled a mixture of smoke and pine scents in the cool night air. At home, she did not fear the dark of the night, but this was the darkest darkness she had ever experienced. She knew forest surrounded her, but she couldn’t distinguish the forest tree line from the dark night sky. Bleating, croaking and buzzing sounds from all directions assaulted her ears like a swarm of bees to the bear who stuck his paw in their hive.

A twig snapping and leaves rustling underfoot nearby! Pippa wondered. *Is it a deer? A bear?*

Pippa heard Detective Lovelace unsnap the leather strap that held his gun in the holster. She could hear the gun barrel sliding out of the leather. She saw him using his left hand, motioning her to get down as he stared toward the sound source in the darkness.

Pippa slowly squatted and stared in the same direction, attempting to bore through the darkness with her eyes.

The car’s dome light illuminated the man’s shape about twenty feet away, walking toward Pippa. A weary Detective Lovelace pointed his gun toward the mysterious form.

The mysterious form put his hands in the air and said, “Whoa, hold on there, buddy!”

Pippa sighed, *Not Bigfoot.*

“I’m Jeremy Slaughter. My friends call me Bud.” Bud continued to approach the pair.

“Hold on!” Detective Lovelace commanded as he kept his gun pointed at the man. “Stop right there. Show me ID!”

Bud stopped walking. “Sure. I am reaching into my shirt pocket.”

“Slowly, and only use two fingers.”

Pippa wondered how he could tell if Bud used two fingers or not. She could only see that he wore a button-up shirt like her father did in the fall when he worked in the yard. He had things attached to his belt. Bud wore a hat just like her father’s favorite movie character, Indiana Jones.

Detective Lovelace took Bud’s ID and studied it for a moment and then he holstered his gun and returned his ID.

“Thank you, Mr. Slaughter. I’m Detective Lovelace, but please call me Bob.”

As Bud shook Bob’s outstretched hand, he said, “Please, call me Bud.”

“Judge Callahan asked me to bring you Pippa Grutta.”

Bud approached Pippa with an outstretched hand and said, “Hi Pippa, welcome to the great Boundary Waters. You are now standing in one of the most remote and wild places left in the US.”

Pippa reached up and shook Bud’s massive hand.

“Let’s get into camp and you two can get some food and rest,” Bud said.

Bud’s flashlight carved out a tube of visibility through the forest, as he led them on a well-groomed trail. Pippa saw a military rifle hanging from Bud’s shoulder and a pistol in a belt holster. After hiking about ten minutes, Pippa saw a fire in the distance, lighting up log buildings nearby. She thought, *This must be the camp.* Her mind wandered. She tried to stop thinking about it. She began to think about yesterday - before her life ended.

Jake walked with me home from school. Not quite cold enough for a coat, the stifling humid summer had moved on. I felt so full of energy. The cool autumn

breeze filled the air with that indescribable woodsy smell from cool air, molding leaves and people burning leaves.

I made Jake a snack at his house. I couldn't remember - was it swimming or gymnastics tonight? A typical Michigan gray sky provided a suiting backdrop for the leafless trees Jake played underneath in his backyard.

Elliot was having a hay ride this Saturday. He asked many of the kids from school and he asked me to come too. It sounded like fun.

The garage door closed, and the sound of keys jingling, and a briefcase being set on the tile floor, told me Jake's mom arrived home from work.

As always, she asked about Jake and how things were going at school.

She said, "Jake talks about you all the time." And she thanked me and handed me ten bucks.

I grabbed my backpack, said goodbye to Jake, and ran out the front door.

Someone near the fire waved at Bud as he approached the fire. Pippa saw a woman with short black hair, and a pretty smile. She appeared very fit and wore a military-like uniform.

"Hi Pippa," she said as she walked over to Pippa and gave her a hug. "I am so sorry. You're safe here and among friends." Her warm demeanor made Pippa feel welcomed.

Bud introduced Lori Holman to Pippa and Bob.

Bob couldn't help but notice Lori's shoulder holster and how it flattered her shapely and fit physique. He fought the unintended distraction caused by her short, straight, dark hair bouncing with every word she spoke. Sometimes she flicked her hair to the right, revealing both her intense brown eyes accented by high arching eyebrows highlighted by the flickering firelight.

Lori addressed Pippa and said, "My girls call me Ms. Holman."

She was the first person to hug Pippa since her parents died.

Don't cry. Pippa remembered her father's strength. *Nothing could make him cry.* She tried to blot everything out of her mind, but she could never unsee it. The more she tried, the harder it was to forget.

“Mom, I’m home.” My voice echoed in the large foyer. Light from the kitchen shone on the wood flooring in the hallway leading to the kitchen. It seemed abnormally quiet. I heard faint sounds of a car passing by. No music - that’s odd.

“How long before we need to leave?” I contemplated going upstairs or grabbing a snack in the kitchen. But there was no response. I put my backpack on the floor in the foyer.

What is that smell? I could almost taste it - metallic.

Mom must be in the kitchen concentrating on a book. I remembered the hayride just then. “So, mom, there’s this boy from school named Elliot.” As I rounded the corner into the kitchen I said, “He asked me—” but there it was. The end of all things good and true.

I saw mom’s unnerving gaze from lifeless eyes. I couldn’t move or breathe. Blood pooled everywhere around her bone-white face. Her mouth was open, frozen, like she was trapped in a scream.

I heard a voice from outside. I couldn’t move.

I heard a splintering crash in the foyer. It’s hard to breathe. A skittering door-knob traveled the length of the hallway and joined me in the kitchen seemingly betraying my location and leading him to me. Dressed in a leather jacket, jeans and cowboy boots, a handgun seemingly pulled him toward me. Black hair, black mustache, mean eyes, angry and loud. I tried to speak.

His face melted from fierce determination into pity and shock as he lowered his gun. He knelt next to me, put his hand on my shoulders, and turned me away from her.

“Pippa, I work with your father. We have to go. I’ll have someone take special care of your mom.”

Lori interrupted Pippa’s thoughts when she asked if they wanted any food.

Bob nodded and said he was fine.

Pippa didn’t look up and continued to stare at the ground, trying to regain her composure.

“Okay, Pippa, I have a place prepared for you to sleep tonight, but first, we have to work out your new identity. Nobody at the camp knows who you are.

The girls can talk to people outside of the camp. For your protection, you need to take on a new name and story, like an undercover agent. We prepared a name for you that could be any girl's name. Avery Lisa Williams."

Abandoning her name felt like she was abandoning her mother and father. Her name was all she had left. She also remembered her father talking about putting people in witness protection. She knew it had to be done, otherwise the Debrinsky assassin would find it easier to find her.

"Okay, Avery Lisa Williams." She replied thinking, *I am now Avery, the any-girl.*

"You must keep your parents' deaths a secret, too. If anyone asks why you're here, tell them you don't want to talk about it. If anyone asks where you're from, tell them you're from Sandusky, Ohio. None of the girls here are from Sandusky."

Lori tested Avery by play-acting with mock introductions to make sure Avery remembered her new legend.

"We'll do more testing and memorization of your legend tomorrow," Lori said.

She grabbed a radio from her belt. "Laura, come out to the fire pit. She's here."

A few minutes later, a humanoid figure with a red eye approached the fire from the darkness. It reminded Avery of an evil cyclops movie monster. After the humanoid shut the red-light off, Avery could see the red-light source was a flashlight strapped to a girl's head. Taller than Ms. Holman by a couple of inches, the girl had dark chocolate skin and long black wavy hair extending past her shoulders. Her smile portrayed a warmth that Avery appreciated.

Lori introduced Laura to Avery.

"Avery, Laura's patrol has a bunk for you in their yurt." Lori asked, "Does that sound okay?"

Before Avery could answer, Laura added, "Don't worry, they'll like you. You'll have fun and we'll take it easy on you."

Avery shook her head in agreement, and she left with Laura.

After saying goodnight to Bud, Lori escorted Bob to a guest yurt. “Go to the largest log building in camp tomorrow morning at seven for breakfast.” Lori waved the flashlight in the building’s direction. “You can’t see it right now, but you can’t miss it in the daytime. The girls call it the Log Palace.”

As Lori returned to her quarters, she thought back to her conversation with Bud.

The forest and waters of the Minnesota Boundary Waters surrounded the three-story majestic log building in the center of camp. The ancient majestic beauty of the wilderness outside my office window diminished the weight of my problems. Not sure why. Many cultures viewed the forest and wilderness with fear - a place to worship the devil. How could that be? It served as a living testimony of God’s power, for it was part of creation. The breeze through the trees strummed a lullaby. The cool autumn winds today prevented us from meeting in my favorite conference room - those boulder outcroppings nestled in the shore.

Does he realize what he’s asking? Of course he does. He built this camp and hired me. He has no other options. I still said, “I think she’ll have a tough time fitting in.” I gazed at the noble green pine trees standing proudly in stark contrast to the skeletal, leafless, oak and maple trees. Aside from the normal training the girls spend each day, we must prepare for the harsh Minnesota winter. Now, I got this to deal with ...

The chair he sat in across from my desk seemed to struggle to contain Bud’s muscular frame. Maybe I was just used to seeing a teenage girl sitting there? Bud intimidated anyone unfamiliar with his warm heart because his unwavering glare framed by his muscular bald head and furrowed large brow offset with a scowl from his firm square jaw that melted the hearts of the timid.

He had just finished explaining how the Debrinsky Syndicate murdered Pippa’s parents because her father courageously pursued the prosecution of their members. His friend and war buddy, Judge Callahan, told him how the syndicate kills all immediate family members as a standard practice when they contract a hit. The corrupt social services division charged with the care and protection of someone

like Pippa would be sure to oversee her demise. She knew he knew Pippa added a burden to her already difficult role. He wouldn't ask if it wasn't necessary.

"Agreed. I don't know what else we can do," Bud said with an uncharacteristic smile, "But she'll have a tougher time fitting in at the boy's camp. She won't fit in anywhere if she's dead."

"Really, Bud? Like I don't know that." Maybe my response to his stupid joke was too harsh. He smiled too - not uncharacteristic, but very welcome because it seemed rare. His wartime exploits earned him many awards. He killed a lot of men. Bad guys, as he called them. Being responsible for so much death, justified as it may be, is sure to desensitize him.

His normal look returned to his face and he continued, "You know, we screened all the girls just like the boys. I am sure it won't be easy for Pippa being the youngest girl in camp, but with no living relatives, she's destined to go to a foster home."

"Don't let their outward appearances of kindness and cuteness deceive you. These girls— No— All girls can be very mean at times."

"Sure, these girls might be hard on her, but it beats the foster system. The judge also seems to think that this Debrinsky Syndicate is pretty bad. All kids can be mean, but they can also be kind." Bud wasn't sure if he should try to sell it any further, but he added, "Maybe Pippa will be less of a burden than you think? Maybe you will learn to love her like a daughter?"

He must have meant that as a joke, so I shot him a look and said, "Bud, does it look like I am short of finding any candidates I can love like a daughter?"

As he sat there with an uncharacteristically powerless look on his face, I sighed and capitulated, "I'll make arrangements."

Laura led Avery through the wet grass into the darkness to something called a yurt. Avery noticed a trail seemed to appear under her foot, but Laura's path took them back into the grass. She traveled as the crow flies, on an unknown direct path. Avery simply followed obediently while the hypnotic night sounds of the forest caused her mind to wander back to yesterday.

Big houses on well-manicured lawns flew past Detective Lovelace's police cruiser. I hated his radio. It squawked with indiscernible commands and calls from

unknown police. Often too loud or too faint - codes and beeps. The detective focused on the road and the radio. He did not talk. The occasional loud beep or yelling response from the radio wrestled me free of my stupor of sorrow. But only for a brief moment, until my thoughts could resume torturing me with the memory of mom's lifeless face.

The detective's fast driving threw me against the door. The tires squealed as he pulled into the driveway lined with well-trimmed hedges that led to the largest brick house I had ever seen.

He pulled his handgun from the holster under his arm and said, "Wait here."

Before I could say anything, he closed the car door and pointed his handgun in the direction he moved. He moved with purpose and trepidation around the car, rapidly pointing his gun wherever he turned. His face contorted into a serious scowl - just as he had the first moment I saw him. I lost sight of him as he beaded toward the road, but he returned to search the hedges. Gun in one hand and door handle in the other, he said, "Let's go. Grab the back of my coat and stay with me no matter what happens."

I grabbed his coat and followed him into the house. He put me in a room connected to the giant foyer. Huge impressionistic paintings with flowers and women in nineteenth century dresses carrying parasols adorned the walls. Ornate furniture stood along the edge of a colorful kaleidoscope pattern rug.

I wonder if my dad is going to meet me here. He worked with policemen all the time, but I don't remember ever seeing Detective Lovelace.

"You're young. What did you do to get sent here?"

Laura awakened Avery from her daydream and caught her off-guard. "What?"

Laura slowed her speech a little in the same way someone might do for someone who cannot speak the language. "I asked, 'What did you do to get sent here?'"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I was thinking about something." Remembering Ms. Holman's script, Avery said, "I don't want to talk about it."

“Yeah, well, no judgments here. This isn’t summer camp.” Laura took a few more steps and asked, “Do you play any sports?”

“No, I just swim and do gymnastics.” Avery studied Laura as they walked. *She’s much bigger and older. I wonder if the other girls are like Laura.* Laura seemed kind, and she made Avery feel better.

“What do you mean? Swimming and gymnastics are sports! You might be better off here than I thought. We swim almost every day when the water’s warm. We won’t swim until late spring. Do you know the crawl stroke?”

“Of course. It’s how I swim freestyle.”

“Can you swim a mile?”

“I don’t know. I never swam the mile event.”

“If you had to swim a mile, how fast could you swim it?”

My five-hundred-meter PR is 6:58.”

“What’s a *PR*?”

“Personal Record.”

“Hmmm, so, you should be able to swim a mile in under twenty-five minutes. Can you swim that fast?”

“Maybe.”

“You might be the fastest swimmer in camp.”

“Why is your headlamp red?”

“It makes it so that after I shut it off, my eyes will still be adjusted to the darkness. After you turn off a white beam, you can’t see anything for a while in the dark. It takes twenty minutes to get your night vision back. I think bugs are less attracted to red-light too.”

Laura showed Avery the bathroom before making their way to the yurt. Laura stepped on a rock that served as a one-step-stair into the stout, round wooden building called a yurt.

In the dark yurt, Avery heard other people breathing. She scanned the room using a headlamp Laura gave her. She saw gear hanging in each girl’s sleep area, separated by a wall. A curtain provided some amount of privacy.

Six girls? Avery wondered.

Laura led her to an area where the hanging curtain was pulled back. “You can sleep here.” Laura pointed to an open section across the yurt and said, “I’ll be sleeping over there.”

After traveling all night in the detective’s car, the pillow and rolled up sleeping bag on the bunk almost made her gasp with joy. An empty nightstand sat near the head of the bunk. *It probably wasn’t clean. Mom would disapprove, but Dad wouldn’t.*

“Oh, and open the window if you want. Some girls like the cool night air.”

Avery sat down on her bunk. She heard the breathing from the other sleeping girls and the creaking sounds from Laura’s area as she climbed into her bunk. Avery unrolled the sleeping bag and laid down in her bunk, turned her headlamp off, placed it on the nightstand, and gazed up at the dark night sky through her screened window. *No stars. No Moon. Maybe it’s cloudy?* She opened the window. The cool air drifted in over her face. The rhythmic night sounds of birds or frogs calling and answering each other in the forest filled her ears. Her eyes closed and her mind began to wander back to yesterday.

Detective Lovelace brought me to a room, and I recognized the man standing behind an ornate wood desk as a judge my dad knew. He called him Wilford Brimley. I didn’t know why he would call him that, but Mom seemed to think it was funny.

Judge Callahan looked at me and held up his index finger as he finished up his phone conversation.

“I might make it this summer. It has been too long since we fished walleye - well, too long for me at least. You probably pulled some out yesterday!”

She imagined him with a monocle and expected him to check his pocket watch in the vest of his three-piece suit, but he wore wire-rimmed round glasses.

“Alright, well, you know the situation. I’ll be in touch. Take care Bud.” Judge Callahan set his cell phone on the desk.

Detective Lovelace said, “Pippa, this is Judge Callahan. He was also a friend of your father. Let me get you some water.”

Judge Callahan stood up and his office chair and seemed to sigh with relief. He steadied himself with a cane and said, "Hi Pippa."

I didn't want to be there. I felt more dread about what would happen next. I didn't want to talk.

He came out from behind the desk to the other chair in front of his desk, turned it toward me, and sat down.

"Pippa, honey, I worked with your father."

This can't be happening. I couldn't look at him. I wanted to crawl under the chair. I knew it. I knew what he was going to say.

"I'm sorry honey. We lost your father today." Judge Callahan paused and glanced at the ceiling. "He was a courageous man and a good friend to me and Detective Lovelace. He was the best of all of us. Your mother was a lovely woman with a kind heart.

"Pippa, there's nothing I can say. I'm so sorry for your loss. I loved your parents, and many people will miss them."

He waited for me to stop crying and he told me, "Your father was prosecuting terrible people who are likely responsible for the deaths of your family. I must ask you to trust me. I know a safe place where you can go. A friend of mine built a Girl Scout camp in the wilderness. Bud and I fought together in Iraq and I have seen his wrath. Please trust me when I tell you, if anyone comes after you, it will be the last thing they will ever do. You must go there for your protection."

He opened his desk drawer, pulled out a set of keys, and tossed them to Detective Lovelace. "Take the Tahoe in the garage instead of a police car. Don't stay overnight - drive straight through the night and get her to the camp."

As the detective walked me to the garage, the judge said, "Be careful, detective. The Debrinsky Syndicate might have targeted us too."

I am all alone in this world. People I don't know want to kill me. My only hope is to hide out in the wilderness. It's not fair.

Join the Patrol

Light shone into the yurt. Avery opened her eyes and her stomach felt sour. Nothing felt good or right. Her whole life ended in a single day. *What about Jake? Does Jake's mom know I won't be there today? What about school? What happens to me now?* She only felt despair and sadness.

Avery regarded the rough wood wall next to her bed and she heard a commotion in the yurt. Her yurt-mates dressed in shorts, tee-shirts and hiking boots hustled about gathering gear and packing them with purpose.

One of the girls noticed Avery, smiled and said, "Hi girl."

"Hi," Avery said, and she sat up in the bunk.

Laura walked across the yurt to Avery's bunk area and said, "Girls, this is our newest member, Avery."

All the girls stopped their packing and came to look into Avery's area in the yurt. Avery felt like an animal in the zoo. Each girl said hello while Laura introduced them by name. Avery tried to remember their names by focusing on a unique physical feature. *Pale white girl with black hair, a big nose and glasses - Juno. Tall, thin, black girl with a really high voice - Brandi. White girl standing next to Brandi had long brown hair and green eyes - Kate? It made it difficult because Laura introduced them so fast, and they wore the same color of clothes and wore their hair the same - long hair pulled back into two French braids.* Two of them could have been sisters.

Laura came over and sat down on Pippa's bunk next to her. "Come and join us for breakfast. I'll get you some camp clothes and you can shower."

Avery emerged from the yurt smelling the clean outdoor air and realized how bad it smelled, like dirty laundry inside the yurt. The sunlight reflected off dew drops and spider webs on the blades of grass that surrounded the many nearby yurts. A giant log building proudly stood like a sentry guarding the camp from the trees in the forest. The air carried a musty, wet leaf scent mixed with pine and a hint of wood smoke. Then the bugs swarmed her head.

“Follow me. If you move fast enough, they won’t bother you as much. Just keep moving,” Laura said.

Laura led her patrol to the giant log building. Avery noticed a large wood carved sign hung over the entrance identifying it as the *Log Palace*. As they entered the mess hall, Avery saw Detective Lovelace sitting at a table with Ms. Holman. A tall girl with long blond hair and an upturned nose stood up and asked everyone to be quiet. She led a prayer and then announced the serving order: Adults and guests, Gunpowder Patrol, Many Cords Patrol, Phoenix Patrol and Cut Deep Patrol.

“Bitch,” Laura said under her breath, but loud enough for those around her to hear.

“Really! Just because you back-mounted her and bloodied her nose on *Submission Night*. Why should she hold a grudge?” Brandi glanced at Laura with a grin.

“She might want to thank you for making her nose a little more upturned,” Alison said.

The girls laughed at Alison’s comment. Avery watched the girls intently, learning how camp things worked. It wasn’t quite school, and it wasn’t quite jail. *Maybe this is what it is like in the Army?* Everything had an order, and everyone seemed to know how it worked. She had so many questions, but she figured if she watched, listened, and asked a few questions, she could figure it out.

“What patrol are we?” Avery asked.

“We’re *Cut Deep*. You’re a guest, so you can go get in line for breakfast now,” Laura said.

“I’ll wait with all of you,” Avery said.

Alison glanced at her with an approving smile. She had such clean, smooth, olive-colored skin with high cheeks and a chin that almost came to a point. Her black hair, tight against her head from the braid, showed a hint of a widow's peak.

"What's *Submission Night*?" Avery asked.

"We fight each other every Saturday night. It's voluntary. You get to grapple with your closest competitors based on your rank from last week. There's no hitting and it's single-elimination. Laura is now ranked third below Ms. Holman, who's number two, and Mrs. Reece, our instructor, who's number one. Laura knocked *upturned-nose* Kim, our SPL, out of third place into fourth place using one of the most uncomfortable submissions I've ever seen. You never want to be back-mounted," Juno said.

"Kim shouldn't have allowed herself to let Laura get the best of her," Brandi said.

"What is an SPL?" Avery asked.

"Okay, Avery, we're not exactly Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, but we act like them. Here's a quick Scouting 101 lesson. You start with a troop, and you put people in patrols. Each patrol contains four to seven girls. The patrol trains, sleeps, eats, and does everything together. Each patrol has a leader. Laura is our patrol leader. The troop elects a senior patrol leader or S-P-L. Got it?" Juno asked.

Bob sat with Lori and the other adult leaders during breakfast. After exchanging pleasantries about the quality of the food and the beauty of the camp, he asked how the program worked.

"Bud and Judge Callahan came up with the concept for this camp. Did the judge tell you anything about this camp?" Lori asked.

"He said Bud established the camp and it's in the wilderness. For some reason, he thinks Pippa will be protected here."

Lori darted a look at the detective and corrected him, "Avery."

"Oh, yes, right, Avery," Bob stammered through his correction.

“This is technically considered a juvenile offender wilderness camp,” Lori said.

“I heard of these, but I had never been to one before. I hear they have lower recidivism rates than the boot camps that were popular twenty years ago.”

“Most of the girls here had problems in the juvie-jail, usually for fighting or attempting escape.”

Bob rolled his eyes and said, “Good grief. We’re hiding her with a bunch of criminals.”

Lori bit her tongue over Bob’s characterization of the girls as criminals, since they weren’t bad people. In most cases, they served as an easy mark for an ambitious prosecutor because they didn’t have good representation in the court. Frustrated with Bob’s characterization, Lori continued her explanation. “Judge Callahan sends recommendations for girls he thinks can benefit from the program and we work with other jurisdictions all over the Midwest. The camp is voluntary, but most girls jump at the chance to get out at eighteen before their sentence ends.”

“Why does attendance at this camp warrant an early release?”

“It doesn’t. The release is contingent on merit. If a girl makes the Eagle rank by the time she turns eighteen, she fulfills her sentence and she can leave a free woman.”

Bob put his finger up like he was trying to make a point. “Wait, wait, wait. I was a Boy Scout. Are you talking about the same Eagle rank as exists in the Boy Scouts?”

“Yes, but there’s more to it—” Lori instantly regretted describing the camp. “Maybe I should let the judge explain it.”

Penny had been listening and she inserted herself into the conversation. “You let the cat escape from his box. You must tell him now.”

Lori was accustomed to Penny’s Russian accent and her tendency to mix metaphors. Bob considered what she said for a moment before he understood the metaphor she intended.

“Bob, this is Penny Reece. She’s our martial arts instructor.” Lori continued, “The girls earn rank from rescuing people lost in the wilderness or kidnap

victims. The girls train to learn Brazilian jiu-jitsu and other martial arts like Judo and Krav Maga. They also learn and train in wilderness survival skills.”

Bob looked around the table and said, “You’re shitting me!”

“The girls must pass a test to prove their dominance over a skill,” Penny said.

“Once they learn the wilderness skills, they are allowed to help in wilderness rescues.” Lori continued, “Once they learn the grappling skills, firearms or other skills useful in hostage rescue, they can assist in rescuing kidnap victims.”

Penny added, “Usually, it takes over a year for the best girls to get good enough to assist in hostage rescue.”

“Really?” Bob asked. “So, what happens when one of these girls is attacked by a kidnapper?”

“She would neutralize the threat through a submission—”

“Excuse me, Penny, I got this.” Lori said, fighting back her irritation at Penny’s enthusiasm to discuss her students. “You saw one of the best last night, Laura. She accompanies me in the field on rescue missions and she has taken down men fifty pounds heavier than her. What do you weigh, Detective?” Lori smiled as she looked Bob up and down. She guessed. “One-eighty? One-ninety? Two—”

“One-eighty,” Bob replied without smiling.

“Laura weighs one-fifty.” Lori asked, “Do you think you can take her?”

“Are you serious?”

“We got a special fighting pavilion we train at six days a week.”

“I can’t fight a schoolgirl. I might hurt her.”

“Sure. You’re not afraid of a high school girl? Are you?” Lori smiled as she taunted Bob. “What if I gave you both padded MMA grappling gloves and head protection?” Lori asked.

After breakfast, Laura led Avery to a storage room in the basement of the log palace. She gave her new clothes and gear with a backpack. She walked Avery outside of the Log Palace and pointed to a small block building. “The sauna and shower house is the only building not made out of wood. After you finish

showering, go see Ms. Holman in the Log Palace. She's expecting you. I'll see you at lunch."

After a long shower, Avery felt more relaxed. She changed into the over-sized clean clothes Laura gave her. After leaving the shower house she noticed girls from all directions moving toward large the log gazebo near the Log Palace. She could feel excitement in the air. She saw a crowd of girls laughing and talking all around the log gazebo. Something was about to happen.

When she reached the crowd, she couldn't see what everyone was looking at and talking about. She saw Juno and ran over to her.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, hi Avery. Come here and watch this. Laura's fighting a visiting detective," Juno said. She thought this was good for Avery to see, so she shoved Avery in front of her and told the other girls to let Avery through.

Avery saw Laura and the detective wearing boxing headgear and padded mixed-martial arts fighting gloves. Laura wore a long sleeve compression shirt and ankle length compression tights. The detective wore his street clothes.

Ms. Holman stepped out to the center of the pavilion mats. Uprturned-nose Kim followed and raised the peace sign to quiet the crowd and said, "Troop, fall in! Listen up!"

Ms. Holman nodded at Kim and said, "This is an exhibition fight, and we will allow striking in this fight."

Avery heard a gasp from the crowd. She turned to Juno, but before she asked, Juno whispered, "We normally don't fight competitively with striking - only grappling."

"Mrs. Reece will officiate. No points - the winner will be determined by knockout or submission. This is MMA style fighting - not boxing. Kicks, knees, punching and grappling allowed."

Kim and Ms. Holman left the mats as Laura and Bob approached a woman standing in the center of the mats. The chatter from the girls around Avery began to grow steadily. The woman, Avery concluded was Mrs. Reece, started talking to Laura and the Detective, but Avery couldn't hear anything she said.

“Laura, she thinks I’m going to lose,” Detective Lovelace said to Laura as he glanced over at Ms. Holman. “Let me know if I hit you too hard. I’m not trying to hurt you. No hard feelings - okay?”

With an unnerving coolness, Laura replied, “No hard feelings, no matter what happens - it goes both ways. Okay?”

Bob nodded, fist bumped Laura and both returned to their respective corners.

Mrs. Reece blew her whistle to start the fight. The roar from the girls watching washed over Bob and Laura like a tidal wave. The crowd hurled cheers, jeers, phrases of encouragement and fighting advice, but it sounded like the white noise of radio static. To Laura, this was just another Saturday *Submission Night*.

The detective could tell Laura was trying to tackle him. Aside from the fact she was a high school girl, he struggled to punch her. She moved in and out of his reach and protected her head with her fist. He figured he would punch her until she got tired or he knocked her out.

Laura thought, *I have to avoid his strikes. I have to get him on the mat.* Laura aggressively dove at his torso or leg while trying to avoid his jabs.

Boom! The detective landed a right hook on the side of Laura’s head that sent her falling backwards. The crowd of girls screamed with a collective cacophony of disappointment.

The detective stood with his hands down, looking at Laura with concern as she lay on her back on the mat.

Damn, I’ve never been bit that hard before, Laura thought to herself as she jumped up, returning to her fighting stance. The girls screamed wildly. Avery had never felt so much raw emotion. She felt like she was living through a real-world David and Goliath event despite the fact Avery liked them both.

Laura decided she needed to distract the detective before trying a takedown. She delivered a low side kick to his thigh and as she landed, she swung a hammer fist into his chest with lightning speed. She immediately followed through with an elbow to his jaw and backhanded a carotid artery strike using the same hand.

With Laura’s aggressive and painful move, the detective’s fighting apprehension diminished. He jumped away from her, almost tripping over his own feet.

She tried to lock his arm into the crook of her elbow. Laura smiled although no one could tell since her mouth guard distorted her lips. Had she gained control of that arm, she would have delivered multiple kicks and knees to his groin.

The detective kept moving and jabbing while she moved in for a take down.

I have to get in closer. I need to deliver another distraction, Laura thought. She could feel herself getting tired. She distracted him with a round kick to the side of his knee and a follow through palm strike to his jaw. The detective pushed her back and landed a solid right hook to the side of her face, knocking her to the mat.

Laura scrambled on the mat to get away from the detective. *He's standing squarely open toward me!* With lightning speed, Laura rolled onto her butt, sat up, and scooted toward the detective with her feet between the detective's legs. She hooked each foot behind each of his ankles and pushed his knees with her hands. The detective fell onto his back and Laura put the detective's left leg between her legs and locked his ankle in the crook of her arm and armpit. She rolled herself to the right to twist his leg outward.

The detective suddenly realized Laura had complete control of his leg since she was about to rip it out of his hip by simply rolling her body a few inches. He couldn't punch her, and he couldn't kick her with his free leg since she kept rolling and twisting his other leg. He couldn't take the pain anymore and he tapped out.

Mrs. Reece blew her whistle and the crowd of girls watching erupted with screams. They were jumping and high-fiving each other. Their fighter won!

Laura released his leg and stood up and offered him a hand to help him up.

"You're amazing," Detective Lovelace said. "I didn't know what you were doing until it was too late. Nice work!"

Laura thanked the detective for the compliment.

Upturned-nose, Kim walked out onto the mat and tried to address the troop, but everyone ignored her or didn't notice. Nothing this exciting had ever happened at the camp.

After Bob removed the gloves and helmet, Lori invited him to walk with her. She strolled toward the shore to one of her favorite discussion places that happened to be an out-cropping of large boulders on the lake shore.

“Laura used a dummy sweep to take you down. It’s called that because the opponent feels like a dummy afterward.” They both laughed and Bob seemed to take Lori’s jab well. She felt a little guilty for sharing this deprecating detail of the fight move, especially since a high school girl just beat him. She asked, “What do you think about our fighting techniques now?”

“What if the suspect is bigger and knows these same techniques?” Bob asked.

“Then it’s game-over,” Lori replied. “Given the same skill level, the larger opponent typically prevails.”

“What makes a high school juvenile more capable than a trained police officer?”

“She just beat your ass in a fight you knew was coming. Our girls are street smart and usually mature beyond their age since they had to grow up fast. Also, I take exception with your term, ‘high school juvenile.’ She did make a mistake, but she wasn’t engaged in a lifestyle of delinquency. She’s doing more good for society than most people will do in a lifetime.”

“Okay, I’ll grant you Laura seems compassionate, disciplined, mature beyond her years and very capable but”—Bob looked out over the lake and shook his head in disbelief— “I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“Oh, come on,” Lori said. “Your police department doesn’t use confidential informants? I mean, talk about exploiting unqualified people— How many crack addicts or prostitutes have you guys used to catch a suspect? Were those CIs over eighteen years old? Did you train your CIs to defend themselves or did you just send them into dangerous situations, squeeze them for the information and toss them aside when they served their purpose? If these girls weren’t here, they’d be in a more dangerous place learning how to survive prison instead of learning to defend themselves, saving lives and serving others.”

“Okay, point taken,” Bob said. “But, our CIs have agency and they can walk away anytime.”

“Don’t shit me, Detective. I was FBI. I know how you use a CI,” Lori said. “You hold a charge over their head. If they stop cooperating, you charge them. Here, the girls have true agency. They do have to train, but they don’t have to join any missions. The worst-case scenario is they come here and train. They get into shape and learn to defend themselves and then they return to prison or juvie-jail when they turn eighteen. You know what the crazy thing about this place is? Everyone wants to go on missions. I have girls competing for spots on each rescue.”

“Alright, we had a situation just last week with the Debrinsky Syndicate protecting a drug lab,” Bob said. “These heavily armed, ruthless killers who show no mercy protected the house. If they were holding someone, how would your girls rescue someone from that situation?”

“I probably wouldn’t take that mission,” Lori replied. “On any given rescue, we develop a good plan that usually involves a ruse and an element of surprise. Is your guard up when a cute young girl asks for help to fix a flat tire or to help her look for her lost puppy in the backyard? A SWAT cop in full body armor puts a suspect on edge. Arrest or confrontation from one of our girls is the last thing on a suspect’s mind. If a plan seems like it has a low chance of success, we pass.”

“I get the ruse part,” Bob said. “The police have officers who can look like teenagers too. We use them all the time. What makes a girl like Laura more qualified for hostage rescue?”

“The training,” Lori replied. “Laura trains at the shooting range as all girls here do, but self-defense and martial arts are the primary focus of our training. She does not train to be a police officer. Properly handling evidence collection or suspect interrogation is not our thing. How much training does your department require?”

“I’m not sure.” Bob couldn’t remember the last time he trained, and he began to wonder if he skipped any of his required training. “It has been a while since I had any training other than sexual harassment training.”

“Nationwide, police only train on average fifteen hours a year and that training is usually for firearm usage and qualification or politically driven topics like

sexual harassment,” Lori said. “At a minimum of fifteen hours a week, these girls train more than police do at non-lethal means of apprehending a suspect.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like this before,” Bob said. “Nobody has ever suggested to me, ‘Hey, we got a team of kung fu schoolgirls, let’s send them in?’”

“You’re a funny guy, Detective.” Lori laughed. “You work for a large municipality that has their own SWAT team, so we would never work for your department. Most small police departments do not maintain a SWAT team. These departments have to rely on another jurisdiction when things get too tough. Remember, elected sheriffs who run for office, run small police departments so keeping their people happy and safe is critical to job security. Resolving a case without anyone getting killed is a win. If they have to farm out tough cases to another jurisdiction, they look weak and impotent.”

“I wonder why we never trained jiu-jitsu?” Bob asked.

Ms. Holman returned to her office and found Avery waiting outside.

“Excellent, Laura got you some new clothes.” Ms. Holman noticed the clothes were too big on Avery. She asked. “Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Come and walk with me.” Ms. Holman got up and led Avery outside to the lake shore while telling her about the Boundary Waters. A slight breeze aided in relief of the mosquitoes along with the daytime sun shining in the open yard. Bird calls peppered the air along with occasional squawking waterfowl. Avery did not smell any smoke, just clean air adorned with the coolness of the water that the breeze carried forth.

“Laura told me you swim and do gymnastics.”

“When did you talk to Laura?”

“We ran and swam this morning before you woke up. We spoke during our workouts. Right now, the girls are in fight training.”

“Oh, I didn’t hear them. I do swim and gymnastics. I’m probably better at swimming.”

“Doing well in sports will help you fit in better around here. It sounds like you’re used to a regular training regimen. Most girls who come here never trained for anything.”

They stopped at an outcropping of huge, rounded boulders resembling car sized turtles crawling out of the grassy lake shore.

“Avery, take a seat.” Ms. Holman pointed to the rock.

Avery could see the Log Palace from which they came. Round yurts like the one she slept in adorned the hillside overlooking the lake. Other large log structures like a pergola and a pavilion stood proudly alongside the Log Palace like palace guards. Girls trained under the pavilion.

“All the girls here came from some form of juvie-jail,” Ms. Holman said as she sat down next to Avery.

“I know what this place is. My father talked about sending kids to these wilderness camps instead of jail. He liked them over the boot camps.”

“Yes, this is a wilderness camp, but this camp is different because we incentivize the girls with an option to have a shorter sentence if they train and help out rescuing people.”

“Is that why Laura learned to fight, like she did with the detective today?”

“Yes, Laura has trained for two years. That is why she beat Detective Lovelace. He didn’t understand either fighting technique, but now he knows a little more.”

“If I learned the same things Laura knew, could I defend myself against someone in the Debrinsky Syndicate?”

“The fighting techniques you can learn here can give you the skills to defend yourself against anyone. With enough skill and training, you can defeat anyone.”

Last Visit

The birds squawking, light shining in, one's internal clock and other girls moving around in the yurt conspired against sleeping in on a Sunday morning, except Avery. Laura woke her up today, since she knew Avery needed to fly somewhere.

As Avery crawled out of bed, exhausted from her first week of training, she realized the training freed her mind of the thoughts of her parents' murder. The patrol did everything together, so the circumstances of fellowship provided her mind sanctuary. The girls talked about everything. Some talked about fighting techniques. Others talked about a boy back home - wondering what he might be doing when they get out. A new hair-braid technique, the variety of bird that was heard last night, a movie star or the dinner menu for tomorrow - the topics never stopped and although many of them bored Avery to tears, she was thankful for the distractions. Laura seemed more driven, focused on defeating the other patrols or some unseen and unknown foe.

Avery knew she lacked skills and strength that Laura needed in her patrol. She wished she could show them how well she could swim, but the lake was still too cold. To make matters worse, she struggled to learn the fighting techniques.

She dressed herself while thinking about the training. She never recalled struggling in swimming and gymnastics. *Maybe it's because I've done those sports since I was a small child?*

Mrs. Reece had taken a keen interest in training her this week. Avery remembered Laura's warning and thought about how it started.

“After breakfast, we’ll go to the fighting pavilion, and you’ll meet Mrs. Reece. Whatever you do, never show weakness and never let her know your weakness. Got it?” Laura asked.

“Yeab, she still makes Janet do special drills. It happened seven months ago!” Alison said.

“What a bitch. Janet didn’t really lose it that bad,” Juno said.

All the girls looked at me as I ate. Was it odd to be eating a third helping of breakfast? After I swallowed my food, I said, “Show no weakness - got it.”

I didn’t want to ask, but I wondered, what happened to Janet?

“Also, keep in mind, she’s from Belarus. She speaks— Um— Funny,” Brandi said.

“Yeab, she asks you to do something by giving you a command. She’s not as mean as she sounds. I don’t think she knows how to ask. You’ll see what I mean,” Juno said.

“Juno seems to understand Mrs. Reece the best, so lean on her for translation,” Laura said.

The girls arrived at the fighting pavilion. Mrs. Reece came walking out onto the mats as the girls took their shoes off. Blue plastic guns and knives hung on a wall on one side of the pavilion. Below the guns were stacks of pads, helmets and gloves. Padded staffs and batons hung near the knives. On another side of the pavilion stood various punching bags and beat-up human-like torsos.

She pulled her long black hair back tightly into a bun at the back of her head. She had fair skin and seemed to be about the same age as Mom. As she examined the patrol, her thick black eyebrows arched even higher over her brown eyes and high cheekbones when she saw me.

“Good morning, Laura. You will tell me about this new girl,” Mrs. Reece said with her arms crossed and raising her chin at the end of her sentence to add emphasis to her command.

I hope I never get on her bad side.

Laura explained that I had just joined her patrol.

Mrs. Reece told me to do something with the mat and said something about dealing with enemies. I didn't understand, so I glanced at Juno, and she explained, "Don't wear shoes on the mats. Do what she says, and you will learn to fight well."

"Thank you, Juno. Yes, I know, my English is not so good," Mrs. Reece replied. Now I know what Juno means about the way she talks.

"Avery, do you know jiu-jitsu?" Mrs. Reece asked.

"No," I replied.

Mrs. Reece asked if I knew any other fighting techniques like wrestling, kick-boxing, boxing, and judo.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

She walked around the mats deep in thought, while mumbling things to herself. When her back was turned to the girls, they began to talk using sign language.

Laura gesticulated something that made them stop and she said, "Avery trained in swimming and gymnastics previously. She's probably our fastest swimmer."

Mrs. Reece's head whipped around toward Laura with a wild glare, as though Laura offended her. After an uncomfortable pause, a smile appeared on her face and she said, "A gymnast? Yes, a gymnast will be very good to train."

Laura sighed with relief. Mrs. Reece resumed her deep-thought-mat-stroll for another lap around the pavilion. Everyone watched in trepidation of the next command. She stopped and turned to the girls and commanded, "Everyone, perform your drills."

"Avery, follow me and do what I do," Juno said.

We all laid on our backs and scooted by using our backs and butts to move across the length of the mat. Then we dove into the mat into a roll and stood up over and over on the return trip. For the next ten minutes, I mimicked the various fighting movements Juno and the girls performed to traverse the mats from one end of the pavilion to the other end.

Laura asked Avery about the special trip Ms. Holman and Avery planned to take. "It's not everyday Ms. Holman flies with a girl somewhere. It must be important."

Avery couldn't tell Laura the purpose of the trip. Ms. Holman gave her a plausible explanation for the trip. "The judge at my trial - he's holding a special ceremony for the victims, so I need to attend."

Avery could tell by the way Laura's gaze stayed on her for a moment longer than normal that she suspected Avery wasn't telling the whole truth. Avery hated lying to Laura and she didn't think she was very good at it. She wanted to say more to Laura.

Laura walked Avery to the hangar and introduced her to Patty, the pilot and Mr. Inginfritz or Mr. I, as everyone calls him, the camp flight instructor. Patty showed her where to sit in the helicopter and gave her a headset. "You'll need to keep this on. The helicopter is loud. It protects your ears," Patty said before she showed her how to key the mic in the headset to communicate with other passengers and the crew.

As Patty and Mr. I continued with the preflight check, Avery dozed off while thinking about Mrs. Reece and the training this past week.

After we completed the drills, Mrs. Reece began a brief lecture about jiu-jitsu, since it was my first day. She paced back and forth with an air of confidence as she lectured, like a rooster ruling the roost. She reminded me of an evil character from an old spy movie my dad liked to watch. She should carry a riding crop.

She explained the motivation and goals with the fighting techniques she taught. She paused and nodded to Juno. She knew I couldn't understand her.

"We focus on jiu-jitsu, but we learn many fighting techniques that allow us to subdue an opponent. In hostage rescue, we often rescue children from parents or relatives, so we don't want to hurt the child's relatives. If we don't care about the opponent and they're armed, use Krav Maga and destroy them," Juno explained to me.

Mrs. Reece explained that unlike boxing or Krav Maga, they can train Judo and jiu-jitsu without having to hold back anything, since we do not hit each other. In Krav Maga, we must wear protective gear and hold back in sparring.

Mrs. Reece finished by saying, "No torture, no science."

Even Juno became confused. Realizing nobody understood her, Mrs. Reece said. "Kate, find Bez muki net nauki. Search the proverb section."

Kate thumbed through the well-worn pages of the Russian-English dictionary that sat on the bench near the mats.

"It says, 'Adversity is a good teacher,'" Kate said.

"Yes! Adversity is a good teacher. We live in the real world, so we train like the real world. Belts and tournaments are not real world."

"Striking as an attack favors the strong and the large opponent." Mrs. Reece made fists and mocked a slow punch and said, "A larger and stronger opponent will dominate you in striking combat. If you have better jiu-jitsu skills and technique than your opponent, you can prevail against an opponent of greater size and strength regardless of his combat style."

Mrs. Reece called Laura to join her on the mat for a demonstration. Mrs. Reece's commanding presence betrayed my perception of her, since Laura towered over her, and I realized she was only a human.

"First lesson Avery. Laura, you will extend fist arm." Mrs. Reece extended her fist out, almost touching Laura's fist, and said, "Green zone. Your opponent cannot punch or kick you. You see punch coming and you move. Makes sense? No?"

"Red zone now," Mrs. Reece said, as she moved closer to Laura, touching Laura's fist to her face. She continued to explain, "Your opponent will punch you, and you will punch them, but if your opponent is larger and stronger than you are, they can strike you. This is undesirable combat position - especially if your opponent is larger and stronger than you."

"The opponent with the longer arms or greater size and strength can hurt you, but you cannot hurt them if you're smaller," Juno clarified.

Mrs. Reece put her hands up like a boxer protecting his head and moved close to Laura and wrapped her arms around Laura's torso, placing her head against Laura's chest. "Green zone again," Mrs. Reece said as she turned Laura toward me and said, "You're now too close for the opponent to punch you with any power. Using jiu-jitsu skill, you can control the opponent using the strongest parts of your body - your core and hips." Mrs. Reece picked Laura up and shoved her, causing Laura to lose balance and fall back into the mat.

“When you’re that close, your opponent can’t hit you hard because you’re too close for them to get power behind the punch swing,” Juno added.

Mrs. Reece reached her hand out to Laura and pulled her up.

“Today, let’s learn the Americana Armlock or V Armlock. I will side-mount Laura.”

Mrs. Reece described the usage and benefits of the submission. Laura laid on her back on the mat and Mrs. Reece knelt on Laura’s left side next to her torso. She reached across Laura and pinned Laura’s right wrist to the mat with her left hand and slid it toward Laura’s hip.

“Get her wrist closer to her hip. Now, twisting just a little can hurt.”

Mrs. Reece rested her torso on top of Laura and slid her right hand under Laura’s triceps. She put her hand on the back of her own wrist and lifted her right arm off the mat. Laura tapped the mat to indicate she reached the point of pain, and Mrs. Reece immediately stopped.

Mrs. Reece bent down on the mat and slapped the mat a few times with her attention focused on me. “This is a tap. You tap to tell your opponent to stop.”

“Control your opponent with skill and speed using your kisbechnik. No, how you say? Kate find the kisbechnik.”

Kate grabbed a Russian - English dictionary from the bench and looked up the word.

“It means ‘entrails, bowels or guts?’” Kate said.

“Yes! Control your opponent using your entrails.” Mrs. Reece put her stomach on Laura’s head, performed the twist move until Laura tapped and duplicated the move with her stomach on Laura’s hip.

They landed at Coleman A. Young International Airport in downtown Detroit. A thick gray cloud cover stopped the sun from shining on the ground. A stiff breeze blew cool autumn air around Avery as she climbed out of the helicopter. Ms. Holman wore a dress and heels, so she took her heels off to climb out of the cabin onto the tarmac.

“They didn’t make Black Hawks for people wearing dresses, I guess,” an embarrassed Ms. Holman said as she put her heels back on.

Detective Bob Lovelace met Avery and Ms. Holman on the tarmac at the airport in an unmarked police car.

“Avery, the judge had movers pack everything up at your house, but they kept the things from your bedroom separate,” the detective said as he drove out of the airport. “They brought your clothes and some personal things from your room to the judge’s house. You can change when we arrive.”

Avery suddenly felt embarrassed. *I’m wearing hiking boots. My mom would be so ashamed of me. Why didn’t I think of dressing better?*

Avery thought about her mom. *She always appeared so elegant. She always dressed like a movie star when Dad took her somewhere.*

“Can I stop by my house?”

Ms. Holman glanced at the detective, seeking his opinion.

Detective Lovelace was not quick to respond to Avery’s request. He looked at her sitting in the back seat and said, “Sure. We processed and cleaned the scene. Let me send a patrol out in advance of our arrival.”

“I just wanted to see it one last time.” Avery said as she leaned back in the back seat and looked out the window as the detective drove away from the Black Hawk. She realized as she sat in a police cruiser once again, this day seemed the same as the fateful day she met Detective Lovelace. The police radio squawked and the house roofs against the gray sky flew past her window with a hypnotic effect and her mind drifted to her first fight training.

“Pair up and practice the armlock from the side mount. Laura, you will train Avery,” Mrs. Reece told Laura and me.

The girls paired up and separated on the mat.

“You’re so much bigger and better than me. Why did she pair you with me?” I asked.

“You’re less likely to injure me. You don’t know how this works, so you might not stop when you need to. The bigger a snake is, the older it is. You’re like a small rattlesnake. When a small rattlesnake strikes, it doesn’t control the venom release as well as a larger rattlesnake does, so you’re more likely to die from a small

rattlesnake bite. I also know the armlock, so this is a refresher for me. Do you want to go first?" Laura asked.

I agreed, so Laura got on her back and told me, "Remember, stop when I tap."

She let me perform the move without any resistance. As I improved, she began to perform more evasive maneuvers.

After I got the move, Laura suggested we switch so I could see what it was like to have the move performed on me.

I got into position, and she began. Laura instructed me to try harder to escape, so I tried to twist to her side the same way Laura did to me. She put her torso right on my face and that is when I lost it. I couldn't breathe. How do I stop this?

I started smacking the mat with my palm. Stunned, Laura stopped and let me up immediately. "Avery? What's going on?"

I stood up, but I could not seem to catch my breath. The room was spinning, too.

"I didn't even have your arm under control. What's wrong?" Laura asked.

I couldn't speak. I really felt sick - barfing sick.

Mrs. Reece looked at me and yelled at Laura, "Lawn!"

Laura grabbed me and dragged me out to the lawn and dropped me on the ground. I was on my hands and knees heaving, and then I vomited.

The other girls surrounded us. I was so embarrassed!

"Kate, we have a medical issue here," Laura said.

"What's the big deal? She's barfing."

"Well, I didn't do anything to her to make her barf."

Kate rubbed my back in between waves. "Did you eat something bad from breakfast?"

This is really irritating! I shook my head and said, "Just— Ju— Just leave me alone!"

"I know what her problem is." Mrs. Reece stood looking at the girls with her arms crossed.

Kate seemed really perplexed as to why Mrs. Reece could be so confident in a prognosis. "What's her problem?" Kate asked.

Mrs. Reece crouched down near me and said, "She fears small places. She's claustrophobic. I have trained others to overcome this fear of small spaces." Mrs.

Reece pointed at my face and said, "Don't worry. Many fighters have this problem."

Laura sighed and said, "Congratulations, Avery. You just became Mrs. Reece's personal project."

Detective Lovelace requested backup assistance at Avery's house. As they pulled into the driveway, Avery saw a makeshift vigil of flowers and candles near the garage door and a large shipping container occupied the driveway.

"A unit just cleared the house. It's safe to enter." Detective Lovelace parked in the driveway.

Avery approached the vigil and became alarmed. The vigil contained photos of her from school. "Why are there photos of me?"

"Come on, Avery, we need to get into the house before anyone sees you," the detective said. Ms. Holman followed Detective Lovelace as he escorted Avery into the house through the door, he kicked in during his first visit. "We told the press you were a victim in order to protect you. Everyone thinks you were murdered. The assassin might go along with the news reports when he reports to his mob bosses in the syndicate. If they buy it, nobody will seek you out."

Avery peered down the hallway toward the kitchen. The walls no longer displayed paintings and family photos. Sounds echoed without the furniture and rugs to dampen the sounds of their voices or their shoes on the wood floors.

Avery slowly walked upstairs to her bedroom. She felt a sickness deep inside. Nothing felt right, and dread washed over her. *Why can't everything be back to the way it was?* She kept asking the questions in her mind that couldn't be answered - at least not in this lifetime. *Why did they have to kill them? What am I going to do? Maybe there was a mistake and Mom, and Dad are alive. But I saw her on the kitchen floor with lifeless eyes. It can't be undone.*

Avery knew thinking these thoughts would make her cry. *Stop thinking about things you can't change!* She focused on new things. She thought about the loons on the lake in the morning, being the fastest swimmer in camp. *Someday, I'll be stronger, and I won't have to live in fear.*

Avery stood at the window and gazed out at the backyard. There were so many memories here, but at that moment, she only remembered bits and pieces of inconsequential things like pushing snow off the patio railing, throwing sticks or watching the squirrels climb trees.

She walked into her parents' bedroom. Her mom had a special room just for preparing her hair and makeup. Avery thought the chair, mirrors and lights reminded her of a modern-day queen's quarters in a castle the king prepared for her. The queen's subjects wept at her demise for they lost their beloved queen. An evil king sent an assassin to destroy the noble king and queen and their kingdom. All was lost now as movers boxed the kingdom up.

Avery's mom sometimes brushed and styled her hair when she sat in the chair. She joked about people her father worked with or a funny anecdote that happened that day. She talked about places they used to go and places all three of them were going to go.

"I'll miss you both, always," Avery whispered.

Avery closed her eyes and began to pray. "Dear God, I know all things are possible through you. Why did you let those evil men kill them?" Avery paused and remembered that many villainous people have killed the good and righteous. It even happened to Jesus Christ, God's only begotten son. "I know our will is not your will or your way. Dear Jesus, thank you for saving me from those men. Please Jesus, protect me."

Avery opened her eyes and saw her reflection in the mirror and thought. *How does God work in people's lives? God gave Abraham's descendants the Promised Land, but they had to enter it.*

"Dear God, I know you provide in your own way. You delivered me to the camp and Mrs. Reece for a reason. It must be your will that I live and learn to fight. Please make me strong and brave. Teach me to defend myself. Make me a weapon. Amen."

Avery sat in the chair a little while longer. She knew her old life as Pippa was over and her new life as Avery began. She stood up and looked around one last time. *I'm never coming back here.*

Avery made her way back down the stairs and nodded to Ms. Holman and she thanked the detective.

After they arrived at Judge Callahan's house, Avery found her clothes neatly packed in a set of her parents' luggage. She put on a dress her mother bought her for the New Year's Eve party her parents held last year. It was smaller than she remembered, but it still fit. Avery stared in the mirror and remembered how her mom would brush her hair and complement her on her curls.

Avery heard a knock on the door. "Avery, it's Ms. Holman. Can I come in?"
"Yeah."

Ms. Holman came in and saw Avery sitting on a chair in front of a small make-up area with a lighted mirror. She walked over to Avery and said, "You are so beautiful! That's such a pretty outfit. Your parents would be so proud."

As Ms. Holman brushed her hair and helped her style it in the way Avery thought her mom would have, she explained, "The judge's house had many rooms. You are going to stay upstairs, in a part of the house where nobody else will go. You will be able to watch and hear people, but you should remain out of sight. Aside from a select few, nobody here will know you're still alive."

Thankfully, almost all the people in attendance knew her father professionally, so they had never seen Pippa in person. They had only seen photos of Pippa on his desk.

Avery sat in a large chair in a hallway overlooking and spanning the length of a room displaying two big photos of her father and mother. People came into the room below and she heard them comment in hushed tones. Sometimes she peeked over the railing below, but she did not recognize anyone.

After what seemed an agonizing eternity to Avery, she wandered off to an empty room and sat in a big cushy chair near a large picture window overlooking the finely manicured, golf course-like front yard. She saw cars lining the street and well-dressed people she never met coming and going. She thought about Mrs. Reece's special training.

“We use a technique called flooding. We will expose you to multiple claustrophobic chokes and holds for a brief period of time to get your mind used to them. Without some work, you won’t pull the fish from the pond!” Mrs. Reece said.

I figured she would keep doing to me what made me sick until I no longer got sick. It makes sense. It was like my swimming and gymnastics training except without the puke. This won’t be fun, but I need to get past this problem.

The patrol felt sorry for me. Carrie, the girl I thought could have been Kate’s twin, speculated Mrs. Reece learned her techniques from an old Russian gulag. Ms. Holman took an interest in this training, and she stopped by to observe daily.

To start the training, she had me sprint from the pavilion to the furthest yurt and back. She said, “Make your heart and lungs start to work hard, first.”

If I wasn’t breathless when I returned to the pavilion, she would make me do it again. Then she had each girl put me into a different form of submission and apply pressure to make it uncomfortable. First it was Laura on side-mount.

“Relax and breathe. Focus on breathing. Do not escape. Do not fight,” Mrs. Reece would say as she started a timer. After the timer sounded, Laura would release me, and Alison put me in a North South. This drill was repeated with each girl performing a different technique resulting in my face being covered by the other girl’s body part or shoved into the mat. Disgusting!

Mrs. Reece would keep saying, “We are making it hard for you to breathe. You need to try to relax and breathe.”

The first time she said it, Juno interpreted. “She wants to make it difficult for you to breathe.”

Yeah, I get it. No translation needed. And the drill continued with Brandi putting me into a front head and arm choke called the D’arce.

Who is that? Something caught Avery’s eye, pulling her out of her daydream.

She noticed a large man with an Indiana Jones hat walking down the sidewalk. He’s just like that man who took me to the camp. What was his name? Buck? No, Bud!

He walked briskly down the sidewalk on the same side of the street as the judge’s house. After he strolled past a large black SUV, he walked behind it like

he was about to cross the street. Avery recognized the emblem on the SUV's grill as Cadillac. Her father used to say, "You're from Detroit. Pippa, know your cars. It's a requirement for residency." She thought, *it's a Cadillac Escalade!*

The windows on the Escalade exploded and Avery heard a "thump" sound a split-second later. White smoke poured out of all the Escalade's windows! Car alarms began to sound and car lights up and down the street began to flash. The doors opened and she saw the driver and passenger fall out onto the ground writhing in pain while covering their ears with their hands.

Detective Lovelace ran into the room Avery occupied with his handgun drawn. "Come with me! Stay behind me."

He retreated to a stairwell in the house dragging Avery to the basement and took refuge behind a bar. Detective Lovelace radioed for a situation report from the units stationed around the house. Moments later an officer explained they apprehended four heavily armed men from a black Cadillac Escalade. Two of the four men were known members of the Debrinsky Syndicate. All four were armed with Uzis. Two of them carried a sidearm. All their ears were bleeding and EMS was on the way. A quick search of the Escalade revealed an expended flashbang grenade on the floor in the Escalade's rear cargo section.

Ms. Holman came running down the stairs. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it sounds like the Debrinsky Syndicate sent an assassin squad and one of the dumb asses fumbled a flashbang in their car and blew themselves up. Couldn't have happened to a nicer bunch of assholes," Detective Lovelace said.

The Escalade explosion caused the guests to leave shortly thereafter. After the last guest left, Avery, Ms. Holman and Judge Callahan met in his den. The judge explained that he was the executor of Avery's parents' will. He discussed Avery's estate with Ms. Holman and Avery. The will called for liquidation of all assets with a few exceptions.

She wanted to be doing anything other than sitting in the judge's house right now, so she thought about a short overnight training camp out her patrol did. Avery felt numb, listened and thought about how great Alison's scrambled eggs tasted. *We canoed all day against a strong headwind and a current and arrived at*

camp after dark. We set up in the dark. Everyone was too tired to make dinner. The combination of the sun, sweat, and wind made her face feel like it was covered in a salty crust. Laura woke us up and it was raining. Avery smiled as she remembered that it was quite miserable, but she smelled the fuel from the small camp stove mixed with percolating coffee. She felt such joy as Alison filled her bowl with the pepper covered scrambled eggs. That was the best meal I ever—

“Avery, did you hear me?” Judge Callahan asked.

“What? Oh. What did you say?”

Ms. Holman spoke up and said, “I think Avery has had enough for today. Why don’t you sell the house, appliances, furniture and cars? Keep the jewelry. Donate the clothes. Avery and I will set up a checking account for the money and divide it between a 529 educational account, a trading account and her checking account. Put everything else in a storage container and ship it up to the camp and we’ll put it in the parking lot. Nobody will notice up there.”

Judge Callahan regarded Ms. Holman’s suggestion. He smiled in realization of the wisdom in her response because Avery didn’t care at the moment. She was a child who lost everything that mattered.

Ms. Holman’s and Avery’s seats faced each other in the helicopter. She liked Ms. Holman. When she met with her a few days ago for her first Scoutmaster conference, she noticed Ms. Holman lined her office walls with photos, and awards covered with guns, fists or fierce animals. She thought about that meeting.

Ms. Holman said, “I worked for the FBI Hostage Rescue Team or HRT. I was one of the few women to ever get selected to join the team and I was selected before the FBI lowered the standards for the shooting tests. I competed in many fighting and shooting competitions.”

We talked about the camp routines and Mrs. Reece’s claustrophobia training.

“Avery, you’ve been through a lot. If you want a break from training or class, it’s okay,” Ms. Holman said.

I couldn’t believe what she said. This training afforded me salvation from death. Learning to fight will enable me to break the hold the Debrinsky Syndicate

*has on my life. I recited Ms. Holman's words every day, **You could defend yourself against anyone. You can defeat anyone. But I added my own words, 'Vengeance is the Lord's. I will be the instrument of God's wrath.***

"Ms. Holman, I like the training. I want to learn to fight. Mrs. Reece always says, 'Take yourself in your hands.'"

"Yes, I guess I have heard her say that." Ms. Holman smiled and looked at Avery like there was something else on her mind, but she seemed to pass on bringing it up and said, "Well, just remember, you can come and talk to me anytime. I am so proud of you. You are doing very well. Just remember, you're very safe here at the camp. Anyone coming after you has to get past me."

Ms. Holman noticed Avery seemed distressed. She keyed her mic on her helmet headset and said, "Hey what's going on?"

Avery turned her mic on and said, "I don't feel good. I just don't want to talk."

"Okay."

Avery could not contain herself. "Why did God allow them to be killed?" Avery swallowed and tried not to cry. She didn't want to get upset, but the righteous sense of injustice overpowered her sensibilities.

Ms. Holman said, "Ave—"

"Murdering innocent people is not according to God's will," Avery said. "But there are innocent people killed every day."

Ms. Holman said. "Ave—"

"I know, God is eternal, and he thinks in the long term. We think in the short term," Avery continued.

Ms. Holman decided to wait a minute to see if Avery was going to continue talking before attempting to console her.

"It's not God's will that innocent people die, but by allowing imperfect people free will, evil can happen in this world," Avery said.

A few minutes passed and Ms. Holman thought this was her chance to respond. Ms. Holman reached her arms out to Avery and hugged her. "Avery, I

think you understand. It's not right and it's not fair, but everyone will be judged. All you can change is how you live moving forward."

After Avery regained her composure, they discussed how Avery would maintain her cover at the camp. Her cover story would not work if she brought in her designer clothes, so she agreed not to bring any of her personal items into camp.

Avery gazed out the cabin window watching the cities give way to forest to Lake Michigan and back to forest. Patty announced major landmarks during the flight.

"Get ready. This is my first night landing with passengers," Patty said.

Avery saw nothing but blackness below when she peered out the door window.

Ms. Holman seemed to read Avery's mind and said, "She's using night vision. She can see everything. Laura should outfit you with night vision goggles. The girls call them NVGs."

After they landed, the cool night air provided Avery great relief when she stepped off the helicopter. She smelled pine mixed with the kerosene smell of jet fuel from the helicopter.

Avery enjoyed the ease and simplicity of her new life in the camp. She had goals and she trained. Each day led her closer to being a better warrior with the confidence to defend herself against a Debrinsky assassin. Each new survival skill, fighting technique or even simple camping experience made her stronger.

Pippa was a victim. Avery is a warrior.