

M. D. MORRIS

Ajlek



THE
AJNASTAZI
OF

WEYLAND

A NOVEL

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ISBN: 978-1-4834-0215-4 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4834-0216-1 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-4834-0214-7 (e)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013911341

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Lulu Publishing Services rev. date: 9/24/2013

Dedicated

to

Mick, Teab, Grisha, and Misha.

Never allow others to define you. Believe in yourself and follow your dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks goes to my husband, Doug Morris, for his patience and willingness to read the many versions of this book during the editing process. A big thank-you to my children, Douglas Morris and Teri Duesbery, for their encouragement, even when it looked as if the book would never make it into print. I am indebted to my twin brother Harry DeLong, for his expertise in chemistry and his methodical critique, and especially to his wife Dee, who read through the manuscript twice and worked tirelessly trying to keep the typos and misspelled words out of the text. If there are errors there now, I put them back after she took them out. Thanks also to my dear friends Becky Crossett, Raye Mathis, and Verdis Knight who struggled through earlier versions of the book, making it to the end with smiles on their faces. Their comments and encouragement were invaluable.

To all of you, I offer my sincerest appreciation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story of *Ajlek* was born in my mind when I was a twelve-year-old growing up in the heart of North Carolina's beautiful longleaf pines. It sprouted from my imagination during long, solitary rides on horseback through the silent forests that surrounded my home, eventually taking on a life of its own.

My stepfather was a powerful influence, a fact I've only recently begun to realize. Arnold Mullins was an old mountain man who instilled in me an appreciation for nature and self-sufficiency. His life in the mountains of Virginia during the depression was understandably difficult. His family's survival often depended upon what they could dig, pull, shoot, or catch from the surrounding mountainside.

As a child, I was aware of his love of hunting, fishing, and gardening—passions he never lost. Even as an old man, he poured over books on stalking wild vegetables. In his mind, if it could feed him, it was fair game. We often joked that if it didn't try to eat him, it was because he had already eaten it. He had an amazing way with plants that I will never comprehend, as though the flowers and vegetables he cultivated joyfully thrived just to please him.

He also loved creating things, fashioning new handles for his tools to replace ones he'd broken. Generally, when they were completed, they were better than the original—albeit an odd color, as he was never bound by tradition and generally used whatever supplies he had handy. I can still hear him humming as he worked. Creating made him happy.

As a preadolescent, I was an avid reader and a great lover of horses. This love, along with the things I absorbed from my stepfather, produced in me

a fascination for anything wild, particularly wild horses. It amazed me that they could survive with no one there to feed or protect them, and that they instinctively knew what to eat and what to avoid.

My imagination took control at that point, and on those long rides, I envisioned beautiful wild horses running free, fending for themselves in the freezing cold, pawing for food in the snow, or breaking through ice for water. I imagined them being chased and captured by men, then tamed and put to work, while others survived and continued to roam wild and free. I began to project human-like qualities onto the horses, eventually turning them into human beings—the Dajhanin.

As the years passed, I created a story to give them substance and character. I considered how people in our world have survived because of advances in science and technology and how we've changed the world to suit us. I had my Dajhanin evolve to live in the world they were given. Living so close to the earth and nature, they were sensitive to their environment and to changes in the weather. They developed the ability to find wild vegetables in all seasons, much as the wild horses do. Their greatest evolutionary achievement, however, the result of their heightened sensitivity, was that over time, they shed the baser aspects of human nature and became innately kind, gentle, and good-natured.

In my imaginary world, my Dajhanin did not lie, cheat, or steal. They did not fight over boundaries, power, or possessions. Their lives were centered on their love for their families, on their responsibilities, and on their personal creeds. They respected and honored their neighbors and rejoiced in each other's company. They marveled at the beauty of the earth and the wonder of life. In a word, they became the perfect humans.

The book is now complete and available for people to enjoy. For those who do, I thank you. My greatest wish is that it will touch you, and that you will take from it something positive and something to think about. If Ajlek were in our world, I think he would want that as well.

CHAPTER 1

FOR THE FOURTH TIME in less than an hour, Roger Winstead pulled the curtain away from the living room window and gazed into the silence of the late September evening. No one was outside. No cars passed by the house, and the streetlights, tall and stoic, had long ago flickered to life.

An unexpected telephone call had hijacked his entire Friday evening. “We’re coming,” Bill had said. “I have Ajlek and we’re already on the road.”

The voice had sounded tense, and Bill had hung up before Roger could prod him with questions, leaving him with little choice but to wait it out. It had been hours, and he was still waiting.

Roger considered the possibilities of what had happened, and then quickly discarded them—all but the one that seemed most likely, which was that something had happened to Ajlek. That’s usually what forced Bill to flee from one town to another, and since they were coming from Cameron it was almost a given. Rational people avoided Cameron. Rational people didn’t even like discussing it—unless they were Bill Stedman. Nothing in Roger’s training as a psychiatrist had ever satisfactorily explained to him why Bill had taken Ajlek there, even after repeated warnings. It wasn’t like Bill to jeopardize his adopted son’s life.

Roger tensed when he spotted the lights from an approaching car. He held his breath, willing it to turn into the driveway, but when it continued down the street, his shoulders fell. Where were they? That Bill had changed his mind and decided not to come seemed unlikely, although he had done it before. Still, this time was different.

“Do sit down,” Fran said from across the room. “The neighbors will think you’re up to something with your face at the window every five minutes.”

Roger scowled. “And what would it say about them if they’re watching me?”

He crossed the room and collapsed into his chair, hooking the ottoman with his toe. Beside him, Fran had one leg tucked beneath her and was flipping through one of her gourmet magazines. To look at her, it was another evening as usual—dinner over, the kitchen cleared, and a quiet moment before bedtime. She was his complete opposite—calm and easygoing. How she had ever been attracted to him remained a mystery, but he blessed the day she had agreed to marry him. She grounded him, something he needed in his busy life. It was one of a thousand reasons he adored her.

He watched as she absently twisted a strand of her dark, shoulder-length hair around her index finger and turned another page in her magazine. When his gaze dropped to her swinging foot, he smiled.

“You aren’t fooling anyone,” he said. “You’re as worried as I am.”

Fran lowered the magazine and frowned. “Is it possible you misunderstood him?”

“No, I heard him right. Something’s happened.”

He suddenly straightened when the drone from another car caught his attention, and he turned his head to listen. When the car slowed and turned into the driveway, he lunged to his feet and strode from the room.

“It’s about damned time.”

He was already waiting when the dusty blue Buick came to a stop, and reached for the door, grinning at his friend. “Man, you don’t know how relieved I am to see you,” he said. “We were about to give up on you.”

Bill slid from behind the steering wheel and smiled as Roger wrapped his arms around him. “It took a bit longer than I had expected,” he said. “I’m grateful you didn’t bar the door on us.”

“I gave it some thought,” Roger said, stepping back. “Much longer and I might have.”

Fran grabbed Bill by the arm and turned him around to face her. “Ignore Roger,” she said, smiling. “We’re happy you’re finally here.”

She stood on her toes to reach Bill, flashing her dimples at him when he bent over to kiss her cheek.

“I’m happy to be here,” Bill said.

While Fran had Bill locked securely in an embrace, Roger took the opportunity to get a better look at his friend. He was shocked by how pale and thin Bill had become. He looked beaten. His tall, six-three frame seemed slumped in fatigue. His blue eyes seemed dull and unfocused, missing the spark that was usually there. His hair looked as though he had only run his fingers through it, and the condition of his disheveled, wrinkled clothing was something that Roger had never seen on his friend, not even when they were children. Something had happened.

Roger was still staring when Fran released Bill and peered into the car. “Where is that dear boy of yours?” she asked.

Bill moved to the back of the car and opened the door, revealing a filthy woolen blanket of indeterminate color that reeked of mildew and unwashed bodies. It was draped over a human form sprawled across the back seat, barely visible in the porch light.

“We’re here, son,” he said, tapping the blanket.

At first, there was no movement, but then an arm appeared, followed shortly by another. When Ajlek’s head finally emerged, he raised himself to a near sitting position and blinked, his strawberry-blond hair sticking up in several directions at once. His piercing blue eyes darted from one of them to the other. To Roger he looked more like a wounded animal than a sixteen-year-old boy.

Fran reached into the car and took his hand. “You poor dear,” she said. “You look exhausted. Come inside; I’ve saved dinner for you.”

If Bill’s appearance had shocked Roger, Ajlek’s nearly staggered him. He reached for the car to steady himself. The boy looked like a walking skeleton. The bones in his face protruded, giving his normally rounded features a gaunt, cadaverous look. The dark circles beneath his eyes made them appear sunken and haunted. His clothing was in rags, and his face and hands were covered with grime. The hair not sticking up on top of his head was plastered to his scalp by something difficult to discern. When Roger’s gaze traveled down the tattered jeans to Ajlek’s bare feet, his breath caught. Several toenails were missing.

“Dear, God,” he said, nearly choking on the words. “What happened?”

Bill shot an uneasy glance from Roger to the street. “Let’s get him inside first.”

“Bill, this boy needs medical attention,” Roger said. “We should take him straight to the hospital.”

Ajlek raised his head from Fran’s shoulder. “I don’t want to go to a hospital,” he said. “I’ll be okay. Please don’t fuss over me.”

The intensity in the blue eyes flustered Roger, and he found it difficult to respond. “Let’s . . . get your things,” he finally managed.

“There’s nothing to get,” Bill said. “It’s just us.”

Fran leveled a pointed gaze at her husband, and with an almost imperceptible shake of her head, she took Ajlek by the arm and led him to the door. Roger followed, recognizing her valiant effort to control her emotions. Later, after she had finally climbed into bed, she would probably have a good cry.

He followed them to the kitchen where the scent of baked rolls still lingered. Fran removed a vase of yellow chrysanthemums from the large country-style table and set them on the counter. “Here,” she said to Ajlek, pulling out a chair for him to sit.

“Wait, Fran,” Bill said, gazing at his son’s filthy clothing. “He can’t sit at your table like this. He needs a bath first.”

“Allow me,” Roger said, reaching for Ajlek. “We can use the downstairs bathroom. A bath will probably make you feel better.”

He led the silent boy down the hall, shocked by how little there was of him. Clearly, whatever had happened had not involved regular meals. He turned on the bathroom lights then forced himself not to stare. The wounds, visible through the rips in the boy’s clothing, nearly sickened him.

“Ajlek, it’s not too late to take you to the hospital,” he said. “It would make me feel better.”

“I’ll be okay, Dr. Winstead.”

Roger frowned and turned on the water in the tub, testing the temperature until it was comfortable. He retrieved the pajamas and shampoo that Fran had just placed outside the door and set them on the vanity, then turned back to Ajlek.

“I want to examine you,” he said. “When you’re finished, wait before you dress.”

Finally, when he was comfortable that Ajlek wouldn’t fall over backwards, he left the room and closed the door behind him, lingering a moment before returning to the kitchen. The gentle young man they had all accepted as part of their family had been beaten and tortured. He hesitated to dwell on what else.

He swallowed his growing anger and started back to the kitchen. The image of the exhausted boy’s skeletal frame would remain with him for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 2

ROGER PULLED A CHAIR out from the table and sat down across from Bill. He studied his friend, gauging the likelihood that he would open up to him. Bill was tired, near exhaustion from the look of him, but he seemed calm. Roger decided to venture it.

“Who did this to him?” he asked.

Bill shot a glance at Roger. “I’m sure you’ve already guessed it,” he said. “Cameron was everything you warned me about. Someone discovered that Ajlek was Dajhanin and everything went to hell.”

“Bill, that boy is missing toenails,” Roger said. “I want specifics.”

Bill sighed. “I thought things were fine until one evening over dinner I noticed a mark on Ajlek’s face. I had to pry the information out of him. He was trying to spare me the trouble of moving again. We decided to pack our bags and go. Then he disappeared.”

“What do you mean, he disappeared?”

“He took his bag out to the car and never came back,” Bill said. “I looked all over town for him but no one would even talk to me about him. I even went to the police, but that only got me locked in one of their cells for three weeks.”

“Whatever for?” Roger said, frowning. “You’re not Dajhanin.”

“I slugged the desk sergeant.”

Roger blinked. “Yeah, that would do it.”

Bill's eyes flashed. "They called him trash," he said. "The fact that Ajlek is my adopted son made no difference to them. In their eyes he isn't even human. They laughed at me and told me he had already been disposed of."

"Why didn't you call us?" Fran asked, reaching for Bill's hand.

"I was in shock," Bill said. "All I could think of was that it was my fault. I had made the decision to take Ajlek to that hellhole, and I deserved anything they did to me."

He paused, frowning. "This afternoon, an officer opened the cell door and ordered me out of town. No explanations, no charges, nothing—just go. They even followed me to the city limits to make sure I did."

"So how did you find Ajlek?" Roger asked. "Where was he?"

"I got lucky," Bill said. "I pulled into a gas station to consider what I should do and overheard someone laughing about a Dajhanin in a cage. It was Ajlek. It had to be. He was the only Dajhanin around."

"Tell me they didn't put that child in a cage," Fran said, covering her mouth in horror.

"Like an animal," Bill said. "The man I overheard at the station was quite amused by it. He described how there would be two showings—one at four, and the final one at six. He was actually stocking up on beer and cigarettes for one of the shows. I followed him back to Cameron to an old warehouse I had passed on the way out of town. Ajlek was hanging by his hands in the center of the cage. Even from the door I could see the terror in his face."

Bill rubbed his eyes. "I'm not going into what they did to him. You've seen the results. His final hour was to be for an elite audience only, something exotic for people who could afford the ticket. They stopped the first show at five o'clock and cleared the warehouse. When they were gone, I came out of hiding."

He paused and looked at Roger. "Remember when we were kids and we broke into Mrs. Ellison's storage shed?"

"Uh, yeah," Roger said, blinking at the sudden change in topic. "She had your bike, as I recall."

Bill nodded. "You taught me how to pick the lock. That's how I got Ajlek out of the cage. If you had been with me, I might have kissed you."

Roger smiled in spite of the lead in his stomach.

“You know the rest,” Bill said. “I called you when we were far enough from town to risk stopping to let you know we were coming.”

“That was a good while ago,” Roger said. “What kept you?”

“I’m sorry about that,” Bill said. “I was paranoid. I took some out-of-the-way roads to make sure no one was following us and got lost a couple of times. Once, I nearly found myself right back in Cameron. That scared me, and while I should have stopped again to let you know, I just wanted to get here.”

“We waited,” Roger said, smiling sympathetically at his friend.

Bill smiled. “How much longer before you would have turned off the lights?”

Roger shrugged. “Not for another minute or so.”

He pushed back his chair when he heard the water draining from the tub. “Sit here and talk to Fran,” he said. “I’ll see to Ajlek.”

When Roger entered the bathroom, he found Ajlek dutifully sitting on the edge of the tub. He sat down beside him and began his examination, dismayed by how battered the boy was. The bruising was so extensive that the more recent contusions had overlapped the yellowing edges of the older ones. A large, black lump protruded from the outside of his right thigh, and though it was ugly, there was little he could do about it but keep an eye on it. The bleeding toes were the most difficult to deal with, but Ajlek bravely sat through the cleaning, gritting his teeth until it was complete.

Roger finally sat back and shook his head. It was as much as he could do. “Do you feel as bad as you look?” he asked.

Ajlek nodded. “Pretty much.”

“Don’t suffer alone, son. I’m a good listener.”

Ajlek’s gaze softened. “Thank you, Dr. Winstead.”

“Let’s see about your dinner now,” Roger said. “We need to put some meat back on your bones.”

After helping Ajlek dress, he returned the first-aid kit to the closet then helped Ajlek limp to the kitchen, pulling a chair out for him to sit. He pulled one out for himself and settled next to Bill, then spent the next half hour watching Ajlek toy with his food.

“Not hungry?” he finally asked.

“Not so much,” Ajlek said, placing the fork beside his plate and pushing back his chair. He glanced at Fran. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Fran said, rushing to him. She pulled him into a motherly embrace and stroked the back of his head. “You rest tonight,” she said. “You’re here now, and we won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Roger helped the limping boy up the stairs to a bedroom he had used many times in his life while visiting there. It was situated over the library at the front of the house. Fran had recently painted the walls a pale cerulean blue, a color she felt went well with the cherry furniture. Against one wall was a full-size bed with a soft down-filled comforter, one that had been handed down from Fran’s grandmother.

Roger helped Ajlek climb into bed, then carefully tucking the covers in to keep them secure. When he was sure they wouldn’t put pressure on Ajlek’s feet, he stepped back. “Don’t hesitate to call us if you need anything,” he said.

He lingered until Ajlek’s eyes had closed. Then taking a deep breath, he left the room and descended the stairs. He would decide in the morning about taking him in to the hospital. Bill would have to live with it.

CHAPTER 3

BILL WAITED AT THE table for Roger's return as Fran cleared away the dishes. He had always been able to depend upon Roger and Fran. He just prayed that Ajlek wouldn't bring trouble to them. Roger had assured him that things would be different in Weyland, but he'd have to see.

"I've never seen so many bruises on one body," Roger said when he entered the kitchen. "I don't think anything is broken but it's hard to tell through the swelling."

"Ajlek would have told us if he had any broken bones," Bill said. "You know how he is."

Roger scrutinized his friend. "You should go to bed too; you're about to drop. Sleep in tomorrow. I have to go to the hospital in the morning, but I won't be long, and then we can talk."

"Thanks, Roger, for everything—both of you."

Bill gave Fran another peck on the cheek, and then climbed the stairs, pausing at Ajlek's bedroom door. The light from the hallway fell across the bed, highlighting his son's sleeping face. Even in the diffused glow, the cuts and bruises appeared red and angry. He forced down a wave of guilt and crossed the room, lowering himself to the side of the bed. At sixteen, the promise of Ajlek's adult looks was already there. He would be a beautiful adult, just as he had been a beautiful child—a beauty that went well beyond the physical. He had an innate innocence about him that was almost child-like, as though everything was always new to him. He was the least demanding person Bill had ever known, taking pleasure in the simplest of things. Bill sighed. His son certainly hadn't had much pleasure of late.

He grimaced when Ajlek's eyes fluttered open. "I'm sorry, son. I didn't mean to wake you."

Ajlek pulled a hand from beneath the cover to rub his eyes, wincing when he hit a particularly painful looking abrasion near his right temple. "I wasn't deep," he said.

Bill frowned, his eyes tracing the marks on his son's face. "I'm so very sorry that this happened to you," he said.

"It's not your fault."

"Actually it is," Bill said, shaking his head. "Roger warned me about Cameron, and I was too stubborn to listen."

He tried to continue. He wanted to say something meaningful to help Ajlek understand, but as he gazed into the blue eyes, the words failed him. Even focusing his mind seemed difficult. He could only stare, unable to turn away.

His pulse quickened when the room and everything on the periphery of his vision shimmered and faded into the same blue as his son's eyes. He felt himself being pulled into them, helpless to stop it.

Images of events he would never forget paraded across his mind: the taunting from neighbors, his son being spit upon by total strangers, his treasured dog, Freckles, found dead in the front yard, killed by people whose only intent had been to cause him pain. Bill remembered trying to explain the nature of cruelty to Ajlek, but failing because the concept was so foreign to his son's gentle nature. He had tried to assure him that it wasn't personal, but that misguided people, when caught up in hysteria, sometimes did things they might not otherwise do. They often lacked the courage to think for themselves and simply followed where others led them. After a while, the words lost their meaning, and the best he could do was hold Ajlek and cry with him.

A new image suddenly materialized in Bill's head, as though he was gazing at himself through his son's eyes. He saw a man who had sacrificed everything for the sake of someone else's child, a man who had opened his arms and offered refuge when others had refused. To Ajlek, he was the only constant in a chaotic world of fear and hatred, the one person Ajlek knew he could turn to.

“You’re not to blame for what I’ve brought to you,” Ajlek whispered inside his head. “But for you, I would have died long ago.”

When the azure began to fade, the pain that had weighed so heavily on Bill’s heart faded with it, leaving in its place a profound sense of serenity and acceptance. His eyes began to fill. This child was the infant he had found in a mountain ravine nearly sixteen years ago, alone and terrified, the child who had stared at him with two shockingly beautiful blue eyes and captured his heart. He loved Ajlek more than he had ever loved anyone in his life, and in the years that they had shared with each other, the feeling had never diminished.

He took a deep breath and gathered Ajlek into his arms and held him. It wasn’t the first time he had found himself adrift in the depths of his son’s eyes, nor was it the first time they had given him solace.

“I will never take you where people will hurt you again,” he said in a voice husky with emotion. “I promise.”

He helped Ajlek slip beneath the covers and waited until he was asleep before leaving the room. When he heard Roger’s and Fran’s voices downstairs, he decided to rejoin them. Sleep was no longer an option.

He found them in the living room in their favorite chairs, Roger’s feet resting on an ottoman, Fran’s folded beneath her. The only light in the room came from a lamp on the table between them. The curtains had been pulled against the night. He paused at the door.

“May I join you?”

“Of course,” Roger said, turning. “Is Ajlek asleep?”

“Just.”

Bill settled onto the sofa across the room and slid down into the cushions. The room was just as he remembered, warm and inviting—like Fran and Roger. He couldn’t remember the last time his own home had been so.

“If you or Ajlek need to talk to someone about what’s happened, I’ll be happy to sit with you,” Roger said, smiling at his friend.

Bill returned the smile. “What does a successful psychiatrist in Weyland charge these days?”

“More than you can afford just now, but don’t worry about it; I don’t charge family.”

“Thank you,” Bill said. “I’ve always been able to count on you.”

“Yeah, even if you haven’t always listened.”

“Leave him alone,” Fran said, glaring at her husband. “He doesn’t need you on him after what he’s been through.”

Bill shook his head. “I deserve that and more, Fran.”

“No one deserves what happened to you or that boy,” Fran said, frowning.

Bill smiled at her indignation. “I’ll try to make this as easy as possible,” he said. “As soon as I find a job, we’ll get out of your hair.”

“There’s no rush,” Roger said. “Take some time to get over it. A few weeks with nothing to worry about will be good for you.”

“Thanks all the same, but I’d like to keep you as a friend,” Bill responded.

Roger’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “Are you suggesting I’m hard to live with?”

“You know better,” Bill responded, chuckling.

“I’ll set up a meeting with the board of directors at the hospital,” Roger said. “I’ve already mentioned you to them—several times. They’ll be damned lucky to have you.”

Bill considered the many moves he and Ajlek had been forced to make over the years. “Will they?” he responded. “My record for longevity on a job isn’t terribly impressive.”

“Your skills as a surgeon will convince them. Don’t worry about the rest.”

Roger got up from his chair and approached a small cabinet against the wall. “Anyone else care for wine?” he asked, holding up the decanter.

“Yes, thank you,” Bill said, nodding.

“Not for me, dear,” Fran said. “I’m going to bed.” She straightened the afghan on the chair and kissed Roger good night. “Don’t stay up too long fretting about this. It’ll be easier to deal with when you’re rested.”

“I’m okay, mother. I’m going to wait up for Celeste.”

Bill watched Fran as she left the room. She was easy to be around. More

than once he had envied his friend for having such a warm, caring woman in his life, a surprise, considering Roger's volatile disposition. His friend was the stereotypical redhead, and with his mischievous green eyes and small stature, he had always reminded Bill of a Leprechaun. He had often teased Roger about it, declaring that his friend had probably been kicked out of the brotherhood, which explained the missing pot of gold and the lack of magic. Of course, Roger hadn't needed either one. He had a way about him that naturally drew people in. He was the cosmic friend. His openness almost guaranteed professional success. Besides being the lead psychiatrist at the Weyland General Hospital, he was also Chief of Staff, and he handled both very well.

"Where's Celeste this evening?" Bill finally asked, avoiding the comparison between his own life and his friend's.

"At a football game," Roger said. "It's her usual Friday night activity of late. She's a cheerleader."

"Ah, I didn't know that."

"Yeah, she stays pretty active. She'll be thrilled that Ajlek is here." A frown flickered across his face. "I'm glad she wasn't here when you arrived though. That would have upset her."

"You do realize that Ajlek won't look much better in the morning," Bill said. "He may even look worse because of the swelling."

"That may be, but he'll look better than he did when he crawled out from under that . . . whatever it was," Roger said. "I'm glad she was spared that."

Bill sipped his wine and thought about Celeste. She and Ajlek had always played tirelessly during the two weeks in summer when the families visited with each other. Bill had never seen them quarrel, possibly because they had always done what Celeste wanted. She generally took charge, and Ajlek let her. It was one of the few times, as a child, that he could play outside without worrying about someone doing something to him.

"What are you thinking?" Roger asked, eyeing his friend.

"About when Ajlek and Celeste were small," Bill said. "This was the one place where he had the freedom to be a kid. Ajlek loved coming here. He was quite upset when we stopped coming."

"We would have welcomed you without Martha," Roger said.

“I know, but it didn’t feel right, and it wasn’t because of you or Fran. It just wasn’t the same without her.” He shrugged. “I figured I’d skip a year or two, and then Ajlek and I would come back. I guess I just got caught up in—”

“Running?” Roger said before Bill could finish.

“We were running long before that,” Bill said. “It’s the reason Martha left.”

“That was hard for us to take,” Roger said, settling into his chair again. “It must have been devastating for you.”

Bill nodded. “More than you know. It blindsided me. I knew she was upset—we both were—but never did I think she would leave us. I didn’t go to work for days.”

“What about Ajlek?”

“He was devastated,” Bill said. “He blamed himself, but I was too deep into my own self pity to understand what he was going through.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Roger said, gently. “Children are surprisingly resilient.”

Bill gazed speculatively at Roger, wondering if he should share what Ajlek had done for him, deciding that he might as well, especially if they intended to remain in Weyland. Roger wasn’t good with surprises.

“Ajlek is more than resilient,” he began. “Something extraordinary happened when he came into my room one night. He looked at me with those clear blue eyes of his and banished my pain, replacing it with the deepest sense of love I have ever experienced in my life. It was as though he had reached into my soul and found the center of who I am. He held me until I was whole again. I wept like an infant.”

Bill smiled at Roger’s troubled expression, deciding his friend might as well hear it all. “Tonight, when I went upstairs to check on him, he did it again. One look, and he had me.”

Roger lowered his glass. “I know this has been difficult, but you do understand that what you’re suggesting isn’t possible, don’t you? No one can just look at you and change how you feel.”

“You’re wrong, Roger. Ajlek has done it for me twice.”

It was clear that Roger wasn't convinced, but neither did he seem as sure of himself. Bill decided to change the subject.

"What time did you say Celeste is due in?"

"She usually romps in here somewhere after eleven o'clock," Roger said. "She and her friends stop somewhere for a snack after the game. He looked at his watch. "She shouldn't be much longer."

"Does Celeste know what's been happening to Ajlek?"

Roger ran his finger along the rim of his glass before answering. "She knows he hasn't always been accepted," he finally said. "Nothing beyond that. I'm not sure how much I'll tell her when she gets here, but I have to tell her something. Either way, she'll be upset."

Bill nodded. "I'm sorry she has to see him like this. It's not what Ajlek would have wanted. He'll be embarrassed by it."

"He shouldn't be. Celeste loves him."

"And Ajlek adores her," Bill said. "He's shy about having people know how badly he's been treated. He perceives it as a personal failure, as though it's his fault."

"We need to knock that out of him," Roger said. He grimaced. "Sorry, poor choice of words."

Bill yawned and stretched his hands over his head. "I think I may go to bed now," he said. "Shall I take your glass to the kitchen?"

"Thanks," Roger said, draining the glass and handing it off. "Try not to dwell on this."

Bill's departure gave Roger a little time to think before Celeste's arrival. Since childhood, he and Bill had shared their innermost thoughts with each other, knowing they wouldn't be judged. Their friendship was strong enough to endure even the most private of thoughts. Tonight, Bill had opened up to him and shared a very personal experience—a troubling one that Bill had obviously found to be deeply moving. Had anyone else sat in his living room and told him what Bill had just said, Roger would likely have met them in his office as soon as possible; but this was Bill—the rock. His friend was

tired and fearful, but he wasn't crazy. Whatever had happened between his unusual son and him had deeply affected him, and he had believed it. That it might be true was what Roger found to be so unsettling. The Dajhanin were mysterious people. Was it possible that Ajlek could do what Bill had just described?

He considered the lab manager at the hospital, a young man named Curtis Frontai who was also Dajhanin. Could Curtis do what Bill had described? It was something to think about.

Seconds later, Celeste bounded into the house, her sparkling green eyes flashing with excitement. Wisps of auburn hair fell across her forehead where it had slipped from a ribbon she had used to tie it back. She seemed all arms and legs in her blue-and-white cheerleading uniform. She dumped her bag on the floor by the doorway and rushed to him, giving him a peck on the cheek.

"Hey sleepy," she said, smiling. "Is that Dr. Bill's car in the driveway? Where's Ajlek?"

"They got here a few hours ago," Roger replied. "Ajlek is in bed."

Celeste's shoulders fell. "Why didn't he wait up for me? Now I'll have to go up there and wake him."

Roger held out his hand to his daughter. "You need to leave Ajlek alone," he said. "Besides, I want to talk to you."

Celeste settled onto the arm of the chair and wrapped her arms around her father's neck.

"What's up?"

"Ajlek has been hurt," Roger began.

Celeste shot upright. "What do you mean hurt? Is he okay?"

"He will be," Roger replied, pulling his daughter closer.

"Then why the serious chat?"

"Because he looks bad and I don't want you to be shocked when you see him," Roger said. "He's lost a lot of weight and has a few cuts and bruises." He chose not to mention the burns, strap marks, and missing toenails.

"He must look pretty awful or you wouldn't be telling me this," Celeste said, frowning. "What happened?"

“Just let him rest tonight, Celeste. You’ll see him in the morning.”

Celeste’s eyes glinted. “The fruitcakes in Cameron did this to him didn’t they?”

“What’s important is that he’s here now,” Roger said, patting her arm. “He’ll need some time to heal, but he’ll be okay.”

Celeste sighed. “Poor Ajlek. Why can’t people leave him alone? He’s such a sweetheart.”

She stood, her disposition considerably cloudier than when she had arrived. “I’m going to bed,” she said.

“Night, Kitten,” Roger said, squeezing her hand. “Try not to wake anyone on your way up.”

He got up and turned off the lights, then started for the stairs. Tomorrow he’d start the paperwork for Bill. As Chief of Staff, he did have a little influence, a fact for which he was grateful under the circumstances. It would be a good match for Bill, and the sooner he started, the better.

Before reaching the stairs, he heard another car and paused to peer through the front window, thinking it was one of Celeste’s friends. The car had pulled across the entrance to his driveway with its headlights on and its motor running. He jumped when he spotted a lone figure running away from Bill’s car. Moments later, the car sped away, disappearing down the street.

What the hell?

Roger rushed to the front door and stepped outside. He walked around Bill’s car, but found nothing to explain what the man had been doing. Then shaking off his unease, he stepped back into the house and locked the door. He’d tell Bill about it in the morning.

He turned off the lights and climbed the stairs. When he entered the bedroom, he heard Fran’s steady breathing and removed his clothing in the dark, trying not to wake her. Then quietly, he slipped between the covers and pulled her close to him, smiling as she snuggled against him. Having her nearby seemed to help. He was a lucky man.

He thought about Celeste and how much he loved her, and then about Bill’s love for Ajlek, wondering what it would be like to watch someone torturing your child. His stomach instantly knotted, and he buried his face in Fran’s hair, taking in the familiar scent he knew and loved so well. His

heart went out to his friend, and he realized that he not only loved Bill, but that he had a renewed respect for him. He was happy that they had finally come to Weyland.

Roger's last thought before drifting into a deep, troubled sleep was that he honestly couldn't guarantee that Ajlek would have no trouble.