

CHAPTER 1



JOEL SLOWLY BREATHED in, trying not to cough as the crisp night air filled his lungs. He couldn't remember the last time he had been outside long enough to breathe in such open air. He moved as silently as the falling snow across the heavily guarded property. His adrenaline surged as he dodged the spotlights, being careful to stick close to the shadows. His senses were pricked for any sound or movement.

He soon saw her, standing close to the edge of the courtyard. Joel had not realized how hard his heart was beating until now, and he felt a rush of relief. Sarah stood there calmly in a beautiful silver-hooded robe that glistened in the dim light. He thought she looked angelic, and, as far as he was concerned, she was an angel delivering him from ... well, many things. She held out a sealed piece of parchment when he approached. He nodded his thanks.

Taking the scroll, Joel held her hand long enough to see tears form in the corners of her dark brown eyes. He flashed her a sympathetic smile and released her hand. As if on cue, she moved to the side, revealing a wooded path that Joel knew all too well. The gate had been left open for him. Neither exchanged words as Joel hurried past her down his path to freedom.

ESCAPE FROM DIFFERE

Joel managed to catch a cab from the outskirts of the city toward downtown. Slamming the passenger door as he exited, he realized it was already half past the hour.

“Great, I hope I haven’t missed it,” he muttered under his breath as he slung his belongings over his shoulder. Joel gritted his teeth nervously and with some regret, wishing he had not come alone. *There wasn’t enough time*, he thought as the ice and snow crunched loudly beneath his shoes.

As he stepped onto the sidewalk of downtown Differe, the city was as dreary as he remembered it. The streets were cluttered with expressionless faces and the endless color of black. Joel caught himself before saying, “Excuse me,” as he pushed his way through the silent crowd. All that could be heard was the tapping of shoes against the pavement.

For reasons Joel had never understood, the people of Differe rarely spoke in public. He had nicknamed these citizens “Black Coats” as a small boy, figuring their silence came from being old and boring. Today, however, he was glad the men and women in black would not stop to question him. He clutched his bag tighter as he broke away from the sidewalk. With several others, he began his ascent to the place he had feared for over a decade.

He shuddered a little as he eyed the black flag of Differe hanging against the smooth, white brick that encased the building. The Renaissance windows covering the front and sides of the building were a popular architectural feature. *And goodness knows they’re proud of their architectural accomplishments*. He stuck a finger inside his mouth and gagged to symbolize how he felt about them. After waiting in a very slow line at the revolving glass doors, he was finally inside.

Crossroads Train Station had apparently been the main means of travel for some time—or the only means of travel, for all Joel knew. Old portraits and statues from famous scenes in history were the first images that welcomed him into the station’s enormous lobby. As he glanced up at the mammoth archways holding colossal lantern-like chandeliers, he

noted the bricks were inlaid with ornate historical and religious designs. The heavily curtained windows robbed the room of natural light, creating a grim and unfriendly atmosphere.

As Joel ventured across the marble tiled floor, he realized that he stuck out just as blatantly as a scream would have on the crowded sidewalk outside. His heart pumped vigorously as each passerby eyed him suspiciously. He sighed out loud, “This is not good.” He hated the feeling of being watched, yet he hardly blamed the men and women for staring at someone who so obviously did not match the rest of them.

The place was crawling with Black Coats. They were mostly men who wore black caps, suits, and long coats that reached the floor. Joel was not quite certain if it was the dark color that aged these men or if indeed the entire place was filled with only old people. Gray and white protruded from beneath their hats, unless there was no hair at all. These ghostly colors stood in stark contrast to his auburn hair and adolescent, freckled face. He cocked an eyebrow as he observed this overwhelmingly drab, geriatric population.

“Sarah missed the black memo,” he thought aloud, smiling. He looked down at his charcoal-colored coat, thankful that the color of it, at least, was close enough to what the others wore.

Though Joel had never been in a museum, he imagined this place resembled one—big, white and old with the proverbial “do-not-touch” look about it. Though pretentious, the station’s intricate decor was no contest for that of his former residence.

“Well, Sarah, where are the trains?” Joel asked as if she were standing right there. Now he wished he had gotten her to describe more of the station. He didn’t want to attract attention by asking questions. The numerous hallways and staircases extending away from the grand lobby served only to confuse him further. He glanced around at the flow of Black Coats, trying to discern a general direction. He had anticipated some form of excitement from the future passengers or from those arriving yet saw none. No anticipation about going on a trip, nor about

seeing a loved one. This was just a means of travel for them—getting from one place to the next—not an adventure or, as in Joel’s case, an escape.

Joel glanced at several unhelpful signs hanging overhead and heard an old gentlemen bark at another one, “The train leaves in ten minutes—South Side. Let’s hurry!”

His companion grunted, picked up his cane, and escorted himself to the South Side. Joel hesitated, uncertain whether to follow them, but time was short and these men were the only ones who seemed to be heading to an actual train. He discretely pushed after them.

He had no difficulty catching up; the man with the cane was moving beyond slowly. Leaving the massive lobby, Joel followed the old gentlemen at a distance down a white marble stairway that led to what must be called “the South Side Train Stop.” He noted more of the alcoves full of old statues and portraits as he continued down the stairway. Joel eventually could not help but catch up with the older men.

When they offered to let him pass, Joel quickly covered his uncertainty with an intelligent facade. “No, sir, after you. I’m a student—uh—currently studying history, and well, I can enjoy these ancient statues in greater detail at this pace.” He wanted to say, “at this snail’s pace.”

With much practice he had mastered the art of communicating the opposite of what he really thought. Some would call that “lying,” but Joel called it “avoiding conflict.” Sometimes he stumbled on the first couple of words, yet he usually concocted a verbal masterpiece to appease most audiences. This is not to say that Joel did not have occasional outbursts. He did, particularly when he was angry.

The blast of an approaching steam engine interrupted his thoughts. His spirits lifted as he rounded the stairway, and, after what had seemed like a million minutes, he finally entered the train stop. Perhaps his journey had begun. There certainly was a train.

“Hey, you!” shouted the old gentlemen with the cane. “Is this the ten forty-five to Facilis?”

“No, sir, you just missed it,” replied a young porter. “Another one should be along in the next half hour. This one here’s not for passengers.” He motioned to the whistling train.

“Blast! We just missed it,” said the old gentleman, as he looked at his watch. Not wanting to miss his own train, Joel quickly approached the uniformed man.

“Sir, Sir. *Excuse me, sir,*” Joel yelled to be heard above the background noise. “I’m looking for the train to Waiz?”

The twenty-something-year-old employee shot him a quizzical look. Joel also felt the attention of several Black Coats turn his way. The young man motioned him away from the train.

Once both were far enough to be heard without yelling, the young man spoke again, “Waiz, you said?”

Joel nodded, and the fellow rubbed his chin.

“I haven’t heard of that city, but there are many destinations at this place. Do you have your ticket?” he asked politely.

Joel shook his head, still wondering what exactly he was going to do about that.

“Well, you could check at the inquiry desk. They regulate all the departures and arrivals of the trains. Take that set of stairs,” said the young man, gesturing to a stairwell to the far right. “Once you get to the top, you’ll be in the conference hall. Take the staircase at the end of the hall with the sign ‘Travel Planning’ seen overhead.”

He started walking back towards the train when Joel called out to him, “Thank you, sir. Uh ... is there anything else by the staircase to the inquiry desk? You know, in case the sign is missing?” Joel asked, trying to look confident.

The young man scratched his head. “Just look for the sign. Come to think of it though, I’ve heard there’s some famous horse statue by the staircase.” A piercing whistle sounded from the closest train. “Got it? I have to unload the train now.”

Joel nodded and hurried from the South Side stairwell to the second floor of Crossroads Station. Dashing up the stairs, he enjoyed the fact that he was no longer stuck behind two old men. After he entered the conference hall, Joel spotted two staircases at the far end of the hall and then sighed in dismay, “Great, no signs, but hundreds of statues.”

Indeed, statues of all sizes filled the hall; some were encased in glass while others were mounted on marble pedestals. Finding a large horse would not be a problem, but locating a small one would be quite challenging. He looked to see if he was the only one in the entryway, then started scanning the statues to his left and right. He first checked the large mounted statues and then examined the smaller encased ones.

After a few minutes he grew impatient and decided to speed things up by listing the objects aloud. “Okay, birds, swords, dragons, shields, kings.”

He grimaced at some of the intense battle scenes. “Okay, I’m looking for a statue of a horse,” he coached himself aloud, even though the task seemed impossible at this point. He sighed and looked to the far end, noticing a thick green curtain like the one in the front lobby. It covered the entire wall in front of the staircases. Joel paused, wondering if perhaps the curtain was concealing something.

As he walked toward the curtain, out of nowhere he heard Sarah’s voice in his head. “Joel, don’t give trouble an excuse to keep finding you.” He smirked, thinking of how many rules he had broken over the past few months. In his mind some actions were well worth what she categorized as “trouble.”

He approached the curtain carefully, hesitant to disturb it. He cautiously bent down to grab the bottom edge and peek his head under the curtain.

He had just pulled the curtain high enough for him to see behind it when a deep voice shouted, “Just what do you think you’re doing?” This voice also grabbed the back of his coat collar and turned him around.

“Sorry, I was looking, well, I was looking for a horse,” Joel answered breathlessly.

“You were looking for a horse,” repeated the guard. His words were slow and deliberate. “I think you’ll find only trains here.”

Joel straightened and pulled away from the officer before mumbling, “I was actually on my way to the inquiry desk.”

Thankfully, there was only one place to go once he reached the top of the second floor—down a long, narrow hallway with office doorways on each side. About a third of the way down the hall, he passed the elevator and made a mental note to return that way; he was tired of climbing so many staircases. Joel hated to ask for help, but he was getting desperate.

Stopping at a glass front, he peered inside the travel planning department at a stark white room with a few locked cabinets and a glass counter. He grasped the metal door handle, the only colored object amidst the glass, and looked around for a moment. When he turned back toward the counter, a woman in a crisp black suit, her dark hair in a tight slick bun, appeared.

“Welcome to the inquiry desk,” she chirped. “Our job is to successfully address any of your travel needs. How may I help you today?” She sounded as if she were playing a recording straight into the microphone of the headset she was wearing.

Joel furrowed his brow, trying to take the woman seriously, and responded with, “Uh, yeah, well, thanks. I’m looking for the train to Waiz.”

The woman’s glazed-over expression quickly changed upon hearing the place’s name. Snapping to attention, her eyes narrowed in response. “Do you have your ticket?” she asked hurriedly.

“Well, no, not exactly,” Joel paused to get his thoughts together. “See, I’m meeting some people here—my family,” he lied.

“Hm, I have never heard of that destination,” she stated as she pulled a clear box marked with a “W” and full of index cards from a nearby cabinet and placed it on the glass counter.

As she stood before him, Joel suddenly realized that this woman must be more than six feet tall. She was now not only eyeing him with curiosity but also peering down at him.

“Is it a city or county?” she asked, while placing a calculator with a red button next to the box.

“I was told it was a city.”

“By whom?”

Joel stiffened as the woman pressed for more information.

“It may be helpful if you tell me more about how this place was described. Perhaps the name of another city was confused with Weeze.”

“Waiz,” Joel corrected. “It’s pronounced *Wise*, but I believe it’s spelled W-a-i-z.”

“Fine. What else can you tell me about this city?” she said as she thumbed through the index cards. Something about her eager smile made Joel feel slightly uneasy.

“I heard it’s warmer there, not as much snow,” he replied, noting the woman’s index finger as it hit the red button on the calculator.

“It must be south. Are you traveling alone? You didn’t say where you’ve arrived from?”

This question and the red light that suddenly glared overhead cued Joel that his time was running out. “Like I said, I’m meeting some family in—oh, several minutes.” He hastily glanced down at his watch. “I should probably be going. They’ll be expecting me.”

He started towards the door.

“Wait right there,” said the woman sternly.

Joel caught her change in tone, then noted she swiftly softened. “I mean, please wait. My manager will help you locate the train.”

Joel did not look back as he grasped the door handle. “Forgive me for taking your time,” Joel said, as he was halfway out the door.

She continued to call out after him. “Wait!”

As the door was closing he was sure he heard the woman say the word “security” into her headpiece, and the red light began to flash. He had to find that train! And he had to find it quickly.

Joel ducked into an empty doorway at the center of the corridor. Dropping his bag on the floor, he frantically rummaged through his

knapsack. He caught his breath and whispered, "Perfect." He pulled out a wool cap to cover his red hair. There was not much he could do about the freckles splashed across his face, but at least he could cover his most identifying feature. Thankfully, the cap was black. He was almost smiling about this fact as he burst out of the shadows and ran smack into something moving quickly past him.

There was a loud crash as Joel fell over, slamming what appeared to be a wheelchair into the opposing wall. After recovering from his fall, Joel quickly scanned the scene. A little, wide-eyed boy lay turned over in the wheelchair that Joel had somehow managed not to squash in the collision. A girl who apparently had been pushing the wheelchair from behind had fallen flat on her back.

Joel caught his breath. "You okay?" he asked, glancing at the little blond boy. The boy nodded silently and gave him the "okay" sign.

He looked next at the girl, who seemed to be about his age. As she climbed to her feet, Joel heard her mutter something about a "stupid boy" under her breath. He shot her a defensive look as she brushed a mass of dark curls from her face. A girl with such an attitude is not worth addressing, he decided. But before he could snub her, a door slammed ahead and all three looked up.

Afraid he was being pursued by Security, Joel nodded to the little boy, jumped quickly to his feet, and started running towards the elevator. The young lady, now almost to her feet, looked puzzled as he ran past. As he darted by, he heard a sound of exasperation escape her lips. *That's the very sound that, for some reason, females are only able to make when putting their hands on their hips and rolling their eyes.*

As he reached the elevator, he heard a voice call out behind him. "Hey! Do you want your bag? I know you're in a hurry, but you may need this."

Joel glanced back to see his knapsack dangling from the girl's gloved hand. "Argh ..." Joel closed his eyes and clenched his jaw; he knew he had to turn back. He slowly traipsed back to her and the little boy. She

stood there glowering up at him with her big blue eyes as she held the bag in her hand. The little boy was quiet, looking back and forth from the girl to Joel.

As Joel reached out to take the bag, the dark-haired girl suddenly snatched it behind her back. “You want your bag? First apologize for jumping out of a doorway and then running off without helping us.”

Joel looked her squarely in the eye and in a low voice said, “No.”

“No?” she mimicked him. “Well, then, no bag,” she said as she narrowed her eyes and clutched the bag tighter.

“Give me my bag,” hissed Joel, as he took a step closer towards her.

The little boy tugged at her red coat pleadingly.

In hopes of breaking her confidence, Joel moved until he was right above the girl’s face. He thought his height might intimidate her, as he was at least a head taller than she. If this did not work, Joel figured he could take the bag by force. Her thick wool coat appeared to be hiding a fairly slender figure.

Sure enough. He saw her eyes flicker with fear as he held out his hand.

She glanced at the little boy and sighed in defeat. As she released the bag she huffed, “Fine! But know that I think you are a rude, selfish, reprehensible, and atrocious boy.”

“You know, I may be all those big words, but I do have my bag now. If you’ll excuse me, I have a train to catch.”

Joel grinned as he tipped his hat for effect. The girl brushed past him and repositioned herself behind the wheelchair.

“Oh, well, we shan’t keep you. I believe you were running away, weren’t you?” she said while motioning towards the elevator.

He felt his disdain for the girl rocket even higher as he turned around to leave.

As he walked off, he could hear her consoling the little boy about how sorry she was that the “stupid boy” had frightened him. *Boy?* Did this girl not have eyes? He would be turning eighteen at the beginning of the year.

He was almost back to the elevator when he could have sworn he heard her say something about “getting to Waiz” and the “inquiry desk.” As much as he disliked the young woman, it was the first mention of Waiz he had heard by someone other than himself.

He hurried back down the hallway, “Wait! Please, wait!”

The girl continued on her way.

“Wait!” yelled Joel. *Dumb girl.* He would have to run to catch her. “Are you deaf?” he yelled at her.

“You have your bag. Now what do you want?” she asked, avoiding eye contact as she continued to push the wheelchair down the hall.

Joel thought quickly. He had better fake some remorse in order to gain her trust. He rounded in front of the wheelchair.

“Listen, I’m sorry about that back there. I didn’t mean to scare him.” Joel glanced at the little boy. As the wheelchair stopped, she looked up at him with raised eyebrows as if there were more he needed to say.

Joel gritted his teeth, “And I’m sorry for scaring you, too.”

“Is that all?” she implored with her big, blue eyes, “Anything else you can think of?”

All the muscles in his arms contracted. *Who does this girl think she is?* “Listen, I know you don’t like me very much right now, but I think we can help each other.”

“Yes, oh, that’s exactly what I’d like to do. Help you after you knocked me on my back. Move out of the way,” sneered the girl.

Joel ignored her, “I heard you say something about Waiz.” Joel saw her exchange glances with the little boy.

“So what, you’ve heard of it?” she asked casually, as she moved a wavy, dark strand from her face.

Joel could sense she knew something when she bit her lip. He looked around the hallway then motioned the two into a nearby doorway.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I’m trying to get there. I came up here to the inquiry desk, but—I don’t know; something’s not right.” Joel then recounted his story.

“So you think someone is after you now because you asked the inquiry desk about Waiz?” the girl asked, obviously puzzled. “That’s ridiculous. You must have done something wrong. Where are you from?”

Joel cast her a stone-cold look that let her know she was not going to find out.

“Augie, he told us not to mention Waiz to anyone,” said the little boy for the first time.

“Hush, Sebastian,” she replied hastily.

“Who? Who told you that?” Joel asked while “Augie” shot him back the same look he had given her a moment earlier. “I’m warning you. Don’t go to the desk.”

Augie looked down at Sebastian’s pale, apprehensive face. “Okay. Okay, we won’t go, but you,” she pointed at Joel. “You cannot stay with us. No one is looking for us.”

“What?” he said stiffly. “I just helped you!”

Augie shook her head. “No, you gave me a warning I already had. Now go away. Go. Go away.” She shooed him, then shifted her eyes away as if to ignore his presence.

Joel was furious. He could not believe how horrible and ungrateful this girl was. He walked away steaming. *I hope she never finds the train to Waiz.*

Joel made his way back to the main lobby via the stairs. The other two took the elevator after Augie strongly expressed there would not be enough room for the three of them.

Though cautious to remain hidden, Joel tried to look for other young people who perhaps might be looking for the train to Waiz. This was a useless task, and every time he thought he might be catching a glimpse of someone, he would realize it was Augie. *What kind of a name is that, anyway?*

When they did catch sight of one another, she would silently round her lips and mouth the words, “Go away.” It appeared that both were looking for something and were, in fact, completely lost. He envied the

two of them for having each other as he sat alone on a hard marble slab across from them.

As much as he tried not to, Joel's eyes kept drifting back towards them. So when Sebastian frantically started shaking Augie's coat sleeve, Joel followed the little boy's gaze. The hair on the back of Joel's neck stood on end as a pair of guards entered the lobby from the same direction they had just come. Joel bowed his head low to hide his face as well as the red hair that was poking out from underneath his cap. He held his breath as the uniforms moved steadily toward him.