

20. You Can Be Young Again, Too!

Passage had begun a week before. It had brought with it a more regimented life, a daily routine that included reporting to a central laboratory for blood testing and sporadic administration of aptitude, vision, strength, and reflexes tests. It also initiated an era of enforced idleness for all but Dr. Albert Theodore Knapp, Dr. Barbara Leonides, Dr. Nostran Shesseribourne and a handful of technicians who were assisting them, because the developmental work of Paradise was officially complete. Even the service personnel, who manned the kitchens and performed the upkeep, were largely on holiday. For they, too, had been exposed to one or another of the viral boluses; and now they had, in a sense, enjoyed a sort of social advancement by being enlisted alongside the scientists and scholars of Paradise as experimental subjects. A skeleton staff of soldiers, whom Lucinda realized must be under strict orders not to speak with anyone but other soldiers—outside of exchanging the few words necessary to do their jobs—manned the restaurants and bars and worked the kitchens behind the scenes. One thing Passage had not brought about in Paradise, thought Lucinda, as she walked into her room, returning from her morning blood assay, were any obvious alterations in the people who lived there.

Lucinda walked to her bedside table, picked up War and Peace, settled down in an armchair, and reached up to switch on the lamp standing next to her. In the week since Passage had begun, she had resumed her reading program. Oddly enough, in the last few days, Lucinda had experienced a new spark of interest in her old books. In fact, her mind had become curiously alive with hope, a revivification she could not account for. Was it just that she felt relieved that Paradise was finally closing down? And that, somehow, after all, she sensed that there could be a chance for them all to escape with their lives?

Lucinda was even getting the idea she could make inquiries about Peter. After all, though the man had tried to escape and failed, there seemed to be little point in keeping him isolated any longer—or so she began to tell herself. The obstacle in her way in trying to track Peter down was Lingarn. The thought of that psychopath still paralyzed her with fear. Had Lingarn learned about the personal relationship between Lucinda and Peter? Was he jealous of Peter? She had no clue, because, fortunately, Lingarn had not sought her out, and she had not encountered him, since the day he had forced her to use the inhaler. Could Lucinda, perhaps, now seek advice from Dr. Shesseribourne? She hadn't seen him since Passage began, either. But she could look him up, couldn't she?

Lucinda scarcely had the chance to open her book, when Nora Bundling and Alma Corson, the two administrative secretaries who shared her room, entered together.

“How's it going, Lucinda?” said Nora.

“OK,” answered Lucinda, snapping her book closed again, resigning herself to the inevitability of the interruption. “How are you two doing today?”

“I feel so restless,” Nora told her. “Like I want to do something! I can't believe we've been vegetating in this place for months—without anything to do but watch movies and play cards. You could go nuts, after a while, not being able to go anywhere or see anyone!”

Lucinda's eyes widened in surprise over Nora's response. Nora had always been lethargic and quiet and somewhat depressive. Had liberation from her working duties so enlivened and excited her that she'd perked up so noticeably?

“How about you, Alma?” Lucinda said, turning to the other woman. “You feeling restless, too?”

“I don’t know what Nora’s so hopped up about,” answered Alma. “Everyday, we go for those horrible blood tests and aptitude tests, and then they send us back to our room. Some life!”

“You’re just crabby!” said Nora. “I’ve been thinking: This place isn’t so bad. If you look at it the right way, I mean. Just imagine yourself as being at a resort, on a holiday!”

“Some holiday!” Alma shot back, adding, “We can’t even walk out the front door!”

Nora bounced over and sat on the edge of her bed, near to Lucinda’s chair.

“Lucinda,” Nora said, “I don’t know why I never noticed before, but there are some pretty good looking men hanging around here in Paradise.” She paused, then continued, “Look, I’m so sorry about what happened to Peter! Maybe we can help you find out about him. But, meanwhile, it wouldn’t be wrong for Alma and me to try to find some company for ourselves. I mean, would it?”

“It wouldn’t be wrong,” Lucinda answered, again wondering over the refreshed outlook Nora was expressing. “And good luck to you. There are a lot of nice men here. Some pretty smart ones, too.”

“I don’t care about that!” laughed Nora. “I’m not so smart myself! We’re not, all of us, Oxford professors, Lucinda! But some of them are cute!”

“You’re crazy,” said Alma to Nora, plopping down in an easy chair. Alma turned to Lucinda and continued, “You should have seen her, flirting with this young scientist at the blood tests this morning! It was embarrassing!”

“There was nothing embarrassing about it!” protested Nora.

“No, nothing!” agreed Alma. “Except that you’re almost old enough to be his mother!”

After several more days passed, Lucinda wondered if, in addition to temperamental changes, she was beginning to detect physical alterations in the two women as well.

Nora, a dark haired woman in her mid forties, had always been a little plump, had deep lines around her eyes and mouth, and carried herself with slightly stooping shoulders. Was she looking a little slimmer, standing a little straighter? Had her face brightened up? Had a few of those wrinkles disappeared? Or was it just that, because she was happier, she was carrying herself with more panache, and, as a result, she appeared more vibrant, even younger?

Alma, also in her mid forties, was a slender woman with good skin and posture. To Lucinda, it now seemed as if a gray cloud had descended over her. Alma's face had lost some of its color. And she looked a little drawn, Lucinda thought, as if, for the first time, one might say that she were too thin. Alma also seemed pensive and edgy. Again, was it just that, because Alma had begun to affect a nearly permanent dour expression and disconsolate manner, she appeared as if she had aged a few years, in only a few days?

Lucinda hadn't noticed similar changes or any other changes in Sally Ruggles or Belinda Meyer, the young, junior researcher scientists, who were also rooming with her. Of course, Lucinda told herself, Sally and Belinda weren't around as often as Norma and Alma. They had a circle of friends from the science division, and they spent most of their days and evenings in the common areas talking with them or playing games or conversing in their rooms, and Lucinda tended to see them only when it was nearly time for lights out.

Meanwhile, deep in the bowels of Paradise, in Station 17, the windowless room in which he was imprisoned, Peter Stamos sat on the edge of his bed, alone. Ten days before, three soldiers had entered his holding cell. One carried an inhaler, identical in form to the one Lingarn had administered to Lucinda. While the other two soldiers trained their guns on Stamos, he handed the inhaler to Stamos, briefly gave him instructions in its use, and stood by as Stamos put the inhaler to his face, inhaled deeply, and held his breath. That was all Stamos knew of

Passage. That, and that, every day since, three soldiers had visited his room: One drew his blood, while the other two stood by, and they all left together. Stammos' only other contact with the outside world came when his meals were delivered, on a rolling cart, also by soldiers, who returned later to take the cart away with them.

Although Stammos could not have known of her arrival, Suzanne Sebonne, after being kidnapped from the streets of New York, had been flown to the airstrip near Paradise, driven to the compound, and imprisoned in Station 18, the holding cell next to his. Suzanne, also, had been forced to use an inhaler on the day that Passage had begun. But, except for being subjected to that indignity, she had not been molested, but had simply been forced to endure isolation and boredom and, of course, the crushing weight of uncertainty about the fate that awaited her. Unlike Stammos, however, Suzanne was a highly trained operative. She had no intention of simply sitting out her time, passively allowing her captors to draw her blood and serve her meals, until they were ready to take action against her.

The soldiers who visited her daily were men. And almost all men, Suzanne knew, had a weakness that she was admirably suited to taking advantage of.

Suzanne carefully observed the soldiers as they came daily to test her blood, deliver her meals, and collect her tray. They were all young, athletic, and self-possessed. They did their work in a businesslike way and said little to her or to each other. Suzanne began to prepare for their arrival, applying the lipstick from the pocketbook that had been left in her possession, unbuttoning her blouse, so her ample breasts could be seen, and making certain that they discovered her in her bed, in a seductively recumbent posture, her skirt pulled high across her thighs, whenever they entered the room.

All the soldiers seemed titillated by her display, Suzanne believed, though they did their best to conceal any sign of their response. One of the men, however—he has hardly more than a boy, Suzanne thought—could hardly tear his eyes from the sight of her. It was he who invariably dashed forward to sit beside her, take her arm, and draw her blood. And, when he closed his left hand around her right arm, to steady it, he squeezed it slightly, as if stealing a secret pleasure, glancing up at her face momentarily, before looking away. This is the one, Suzanne concluded, coming to a decision as she watched the test-tube fill with crimson fluid, to whom she must turn!

During the soldiers' subsequent visits, Suzanne started to catch his eye. It was hard, at first, because he kept looking away. But, eventually, he began to return her soulful glances.

Finally, while he was seated in front of her, drawing her blood, Lucinda contrived to press her leg against his leg, and she caught and held his eye when he looked up at her sharply.

“What is your name?” Suzanne asked him, softly.

“Paul,” he answered, almost whispering, as if hoping his companions wouldn't notice their exchange.

Suzanne, who could see the other two soldiers over Paul's shoulder, standing and talking by the door, realized that they were waiting to go and weren't paying any attention to Paul or her.

“They're not listening,” Suzanne told him sotto voce. “Come to me, later. Alone. Can you do it?”

Paul looked at her with wide brown eyes, his heart pounding.

“I—don't know,” he answered quickly and quietly. “I'll try.”

It was the middle of the night when Suzanne heard the bolt turning on her door, and she knew it must be Paul, returning.

Paul opened the door, then closed it, and bolted it quietly behind him.

“I’m here,” Paul told Suzanne, eyeing her as she lay back in her usual recumbent pose, looking up from the magazine she pretended to have been reading.

So much, Suzanne thought, I can see for myself! Now what, she wondered, can I do with you?

“No one saw you coming?” Suzanne asked, laying the magazine aside.

“This wing is almost deserted,” Paul explained. “There’s only you and one other prisoner. And there’s only one guard at the entrance to the elevator at night. I told him I was looking for something in one of the storage compartments. He didn’t care one way or the other.”

“Would you like to come sit by me?” asked Suzanne, sitting up, propping herself up on the pillows, and patting the mattress beside her.

Paul hesitated, then walked over to the bed and sat down.

“Why did you ask me to come see you?” Paul asked. “I guess you get kind of lonely in here, all by yourself, day after day?”

“Are you American?” asked Suzanne. “I hear a slight accent, but—”

“My mother is from the United States,” Paul told her. “My father is German. I have a dual citizenship.”

“What a coincidence!” Suzanne exclaimed. “My mother is also American and my father is French! I have a dual citizenship, too! Maybe that has something to do with why we feel some kind of—bond between us? I don’t know....”

Suzanne moved closer to him.

“I do feel alone, so alone!” Suzanne exclaimed. “I don’t even know what I’m doing here!”

“You don’t know why you’re here?” said Paul. “There must be a reason they brought you. Weren’t you involved in something that would explain it? Were you doing research into genetics?” He looked at her intensely. “No, you’re too young! It must be something else. Were you involved with someone who’s doing that work? It’s the only thing I can think of....”

“Genetics?” responded Suzanne. “I don’t know anything about genetics. I was seeing a boy at graduate school. He was studying science, but I don’t think it had anything to do with genetics or biology.” She feigned confusion, adding, “What is this place? Some kind of secret genetics laboratory? Why are they taking prisoners? I don’t get it! I don’t understand! What do they want with me?”

“It is a secret laboratory,” answered Paul. “There are a couple of hundred people here, all of them locked in. They’re all prisoners, you could say—though they’re not all in cells, the way you are. Most of them have the run of the compound.”

“I just know they’re going to kill me!” Suzanne cried out.

“What makes you say that?” said Paul. “I can’t say what the plans are, because I don’t know. But no one is being killed, here. Our orders are just to make sure that everything goes smoothly and that no one makes any trouble.”

Suzanne reached out and took Paul’s right hand in her own.

“Paul,” she said softly, “I don’t know why I’m sure, but I’m sure! I can feel it! Whoever is running this place is cold-blooded and doesn’t intend for us to get out of here alive!”

Paul, who squeezed her hand in return, was so affected by her touch that it took him a moment to catch up with the contents of her last remarks.

“Well,” he answered, finally, an unhappy expression on his face, “I have to admit, I don’t really know what’s going to happen. We soldiers were enlisted to do a job. We weren’t given any extra information beyond what we needed to do it.”

“Is that what you want?” Suzanne asked him, releasing his hand, running her fingers back through her thick black hair. “Do you want them to kill me? So you can get on to your next assignment?”

“No!” Paul cried out. “I—I—like you! You’re so beautiful, so sweet! And you’re so innocent—anyone can see that! You hardly seem out of your teens! What could you possibly have done to deserve being held in this dungeon?”

Hardly out of her teens? Paul was hardly out his teens! She was in her late twenties. Suzanne wondered over the power of infatuation to distort perceptions.

“But I didn’t do anything, I tell you!” Suzanne declared. “I know it’s asking a lot—maybe too much—after all, you don’t even know me—but is there any way, any way at all, you could help me, help me to protect myself?” She paused, looking down, then, raising her eyes up to meet his, added, “Even help me—to escape?”

Paul froze. When he had decided to accept Suzanne’s invitation to visit her in her cell, he had done so in the transports of desire, imbued with the inchoate sense that she could somehow be persuaded to give herself to him. Paul had had no inkling that he would be approached with a request to aid her in breaking out of Paradise!

“I don’t think,” Paul answered finally, “that you know what you’re asking! The people I serve require absolute loyalty. If they knew I was here, now, just talking to you—I don’t know what would happen to me! Besides, this place is an armed fortress. I couldn’t just open the gates and let you go, even if I wanted to!”

“I know that, Paul!” agreed Suzanne. “I know it’s risky. And I know it wouldn’t be simple to do. Of course, you can’t just open the gates! But, at least, if I know you’re willing to consider it, at least to think about it—I could have some hope! Some hope, to keep me from going crazy as I sit in this cell, day after day, night after night!”

Suzanne lowered her head and closed her eyes, as if overcome with despair.

“That’s all I can say,” Paul responded, agitated by her evident distress, “that I’ll think about it. Don’t lose hope, Suzanne! Remember, you don’t know that they mean to hurt you!”

Suzanne looked up at him, affecting a small smile.

“Thank you, Paul!” Suzanne said, seizing both his hands with hers. “You’ve given me hope. That means everything to me now.”

“Can I ask you something?” said Paul.

“What is it?” asked Suzanne.

“That boy you told me about,” Paul continued, “the one you said you were seeing at school, the science student?”

“Yes?” Suzanne said.

“Were you serious about him?” Paul blurted out. “I mean, do you intend to go back to him, when you get out of here?”

“Serious?” answered Suzanne. “About Todd? No, we’d just started dating. He was just a friend, really. Why—”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” said Paul, cutting her short, rising from the bed. “I should go now. Take care of yourself. Try to be strong. I’ll come back to see you again. Tomorrow night, if possible.”

Suzanne stood as well and stepped towards Paul, throwing her arms around him.

“Good night!” Suzanne said, pressing her body against his. “I’ll wait for you! Then, pulling herself away, she added, “Well, I guess you know that. I can’t exactly go anywhere, can I?”

“Good night,” Paul answered, fighting an almost overwhelming urge to take her in his arms again, and turned to walk to the door. “Until tomorrow!” he added, opening the door, shooting her a last, lingering look, and slipping out into the corridor, before closing the door behind him again.

However, the following morning, when the door opened, and Suzanne had prepared herself for breakfast to be rolled in on a cart, the two soldiers who usually delivered it arrived empty handed, stopping together when they had reached the table where she sat.

“You are coming with us, now,” said one of the soldiers, with a German accent.

“Coming with you?” Suzanne asked. “Where am I going?”

“Your room is being new,” answered the soldier. “Going to new room.”

“I’m going to a new room?” echoed Suzanne, with the sinking feeling that her tête-à-tête with Paul must have been discovered. Oh well! she thought, bitterly disappointed. It had seemed too easy.

“Come,” insisted the soldier who had been speaking. “You are going now.”

Suzanne pushed her chair back from the table and stood up and noticed how the soldiers towered before her. I must look pretty harmless to these guys, she thought. The man who had been addressing her was about 6’ 1” tall. The other man was about 6’ 2”. Suzanne stood 5’ 5” and was as slender as a dancer. They couldn’t know, she realized, that she had been trained to disable and kill, with any implements available and with her bare hands, if necessary—even

though, she confessed to herself, she certainly wouldn't relish a fatal confrontation with these young, armed commandos.

Suzanne started to gather up the clothing, toiletries, and books and other sundries that she had been provided with, but the chatty soldier stopped her and managed to convey the information that everything would be collected and delivered on her behalf to her new quarters.

One of soldiers held the door as Suzanne went out into the corridor flanked by the other. It was the first time she had left her room in almost two weeks. She looked up and down the hall. It was empty and sterile, lined with closed doors, with no sound, no sign of occupation.

One soldier closed the door of the room in which she had been held, and each walked on either side of her, as they made their way down the corridor. They had only gone about thirty feet, when the soldiers stopped, and one stepped up to a metal door and unlocked it, opened it, and stepped aside to allow Suzanne and the other soldier to enter together before him.

The room was not unlike the room which she had formerly occupied, except that it was much larger. It also contained more furniture. More chairs, for example. Most notably, it housed two beds, which were partially partitioned off from one another by a tall, opaque screen.

But on one of the beds, sitting upright, dressed in slacks and an open shirt, was the real surprise! It was a man, a tall, blond, handsome man, and he was looking back at her with as much astonishment as that with which she was regarding him! And it was obvious from the arrangement of the room, Suzanne immediately realized, that their keepers intended that Suzanne and this man were to become roommates. It also seemed apparent to her, from the presence of two beds and the screen, that their captors were not trying to force intimacy on them—only to make it inviting.

Before she had had a chance to speak, she heard the door clanging shut behind her, and she turned to find that the soldiers had already gone and left them alone.

Well, Suzanne thought, turning to face the man again, so much for formal introductions!

“I’m Peter Stammos,” the man told Suzanne, as if reading her mind, sliding off the bed, standing, and taking a couple of steps toward her. “I’m sorry for all this. It wasn’t my idea, you know. They brought me to this room this morning. I had no idea a young girl would be put in here with me. I’ve been a prisoner for over a month.”

A young girl! Well, I like that, thought Suzanne. But this is getting a bit strange. Last night, Paul took me for nearly a teenager, and now this man....

“If it’ll make you feel any better,” Suzanne answered, “I’m older than I look. But, anyway, I know this isn’t your fault. I’m Suzanne Taylor. I was kidnapped and brought here less than two weeks ago. But I don’t know why they put us together. Do you?”

“No,” answered Stammos. “Unless it’s part of the experiment....”

“The ‘experiment’?” asked Suzanne. “What experiment is that?”

“I mean Passage, of course,” said Stammos. Noting the lack of comprehension on her face, he asked, “Don’t you know about Passage?” Suzanne shook her head. “When you arrived, did someone force you to use an inhaler? Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” answered Suzanne. “I know. I was forced to use it, just as you said. Is that this ‘Passage’ you’re talking about?” She paused, then continued, “So, we’re both part of some experiment?”

“Unfortunately,” Stammos told her, “yes.”

Stammos had been imprisoned before the two assemblies at which Cardinal Donnelly’s explanatory tape about Passage had been played. But, when the technician, who recognized him

as one of the leaders of the genetic research project, administered the inhaler to him, the man mercifully gave him an unofficial synopsis of what Passage was all about. Now, Stammos repeated to Suzanne what he had been told: That everyone in the compound was being used as a guinea pig for either a rejuvenation or a senescence treatment, treatments, Stammos added, that had been developed in the compound over the previous couple of months.

“But no point standing here,” Stammos said. “They’ve added some amenities to this room, including a refrigerator and a coffee maker. I’d put on some coffee before you arrived. So why don’t we sit down and have some coffee and get acquainted?”

Yes, why not indeed, thought Suzanne, walking over to the little table that she assumed would host their little get together. Before she could pull out a chair, Stammos dashed over to help her into her seat. From a counter along the wall, he brought over two mugs, two spoons, and a sugar bowl, and returned to the counter to retrieve the carafe that was filled with steaming coffee.

“No milk or cream, I’m afraid,” Stammos said, sitting down beside Suzanne. “Service here is terrible!”

“I take it black anyway,” said Suzanne, with a gleam in her eye, wondering over his good humor, raising her cup to her lips.

“So,” said Stammos, “this rejuvenation and senescence stuff, does it make any sense to you? Does it ring any bells? I’m asking, because you said you were recently kidnapped and brought to Paradise. Everyone else has been here for months. But people in the outside world don’t know about the work we were doing here.”

“Paradise?” asked Suzanne. “Is that what they call this place?”

“Didn’t you know?” asked Stammos.

“That’s the first time I ever heard it!” Suzanne told him.

“Yes, Paradise!” Stamos exclaimed. His face darkened with the memory of Lucinda, and he added, “Someone once told me that the word means ‘a walled garden.’ And this is a kind of walled garden, so it is aptly named, strangely enough!”

Suzanne saw the pain transfiguring Stamos face. But she did not know him well enough to ask about its cause. Still, somehow, she ached to afford him some relief.

“You asked me about rejuvenation and senescence,” Suzanne said, hoping to turn Stamos’ mind from whatever was troubling him. “The answer is, ‘yes.’ I can’t tell you the details, but I’m familiar with this ‘stuff,’ as you put it. Although I didn’t know, until just now, that this place had been set up to develop those rejuvenation and senescence compounds.” She paused, then asked, “You don’t happen to know where in the world we are, do you?”

“Ah!” answered Stamos, with a short laugh. “The eternal question! No, I’m sorry. I have no idea where we are. As far as I know, nobody in Paradise knows where Paradise is—if that’s possible!

“By the way,” Stamos added, looking at Suzanne, with wide approving eyes, as if for the first time, “I think I understand now what you meant when you said that you were older than you looked.”

“What?” asked Suzanne. “What did I mean? I’d like to know also!”

“I’ve been locked up in a cell since Passage begun,” Stamos explained, “with no one to keep me company, except for the guards. They hadn’t taken either the rejuvenation or the senescence treatment, of course.” He paused and then continued, “But you have taken one of the treatments.”

“You mean, the inhaler?” asked Suzanne.

“Yes, the inhaler,” answered Stamos. “Obviously, you got the rejuvenation treatment. And it’s starting to work!”

Suzanne sat back in her chair, stunned.

“You must have been young and very beautiful to start with,” Stamos told her. “Now, you look like a girl of twenty, and, frankly,” he added, taking a deep breath, “you’re so sweet that it’s hard for a man to keep his hands off of you!”

Suzanne was surprised to feel herself blush to hear his words.

But, wait, she thought. There was another side to all of this....

“But, you,” Suzanne said, looking closely at his face, “what treatment did you get?”

“How old do I look?” answered Stamos. “About forty or so? Maybe forty-five?” He closed his eyes and paused for a moment before opening them and continuing, “I’m only thirty, Suzanne! You understand? I’m only thirty!”

Suzanne regarded him with a strange mixture of feelings. Yes, Stamos looked to her like a remarkably handsome man in his late forties! He had the definition in his face of a man of that age, the lines around the mouth and the eyes. She found herself drawn to the maturity in Stamos’ appearance, not put off by it. But that wasn’t the point. The point was that, if Stamos had received the senescence treatment, he wouldn’t stay forty-five for long. He would be doomed to age with incredibly rapidity, and, in a matter of weeks, to die, a withered, old man!

“Peter!” Suzanne cried out in alarm, reaching across the table to take his hand, aware, as she felt her heart beating, that she was speaking his name for the first time. “We can’t let you die of old age!”

“Can’t?” Stamos gently mocked, covering the hand that held his with his other hand, moved nearly to tears by the solicitude in her voice. For he had been utterly alone and had never

heard accents of concern over the cruel death that awaited him. “But what can we do about it, my sweet child?”

“Haven’t you heard?” said Suzanne, lifting her other hand from her lap to the table, to join both of his, thrilling him as she pressed his hands between her own soft hands. “They have a rejuvenation treatment here,” she told him, looking at Stamos intensely, to lend him courage, her luminous black eyes opening wide and glowing with resolve, and exciting him by forcing a small smile to her moistened, parted lips. “All you have to do is get it—and inhale deeply! And you can be young again, too!”