

## Chapter 1

1961

New Hampshire

Lish's father, Eric, liked to travel on back roads. The interstate was faster, but he believed that back roads offered a better trip. Boston's congestion was tolerated, he claimed, because they lived in the city and schedules had to be kept. Once beyond home on an outing, time became unimportant.

The family found interesting sights and places along the way – in the middle of nowhere was the very best place to buy homemade ice cream – but trips took forever. And when you were twelve, forever was as short as two hours.

Lish glanced at her younger sister who had been cutting out paper dolls during the entire journey. Patient, sedentary Kay.

Lish was Kay's opposite. She could remain stationary, sketching on a pad, only briefly before growing restless to unfold her long legs. As soon as they arrived, she would run to the river concealed behind the pines bounding Warren's place. The river was the very best spot to explore.

Hopeful, Lish stared out the window. Deciduous trees grew virtually to roadside in New Hampshire. Oaks, birches, maples – occasionally she amused herself by counting the number of each, but kept ever alert for sandy soil and the appearance of pines. She sighed impatiently.

“Ivar, this get together so far away. New Hampshire, whew! It is necessary, *da?*”

The man glanced away from the road at his wife. “I have said that it is, Ludmilla.”

“They are all Swedish.”

“I remind you. I am Swedish. This is business. We are a small community in Boston and it is important for us to take advantage of our opportunities. Eric Lindstrom is a master craftsman who owns a cabinet shop. I trade there. But more important, his brother, Alaric, is an architect, who has a preferred list of contractors that are invited to bid on his jobs. I am one such contractor.” Ivar shrugged. “Makes sense to me.

Eh, Skeppare, you, too?”

“Yeah, it does,” agreed the fourteen year old in the back seat, shifting in irritation. Invariably, his parents argued. They communicated by disagreeing. Skip assumed that after the Second World War, the bright yellow hair, icy blue eyes and helpless manner of refugee Ludmilla Golubova had attracted his father, a plain, thirty year old Stockholm carpenter on the brink of emigrating to America. The enchantment, however, had waned years ago. Yet the couple stayed married. In that respect, they shared a common Old World mentality.

“And chicken? This Warren is a chicken broker? I am allergic to chicken,” Ludmilla complained. “It is what they will serve, I just know.”

Skip sighed to himself. Closing his eyes, he turned to the open window and let the hot August breeze blast his face. His mother claimed her health was bad, but Ludmilla was more fit than anyone, including the robust men who worked for his father. She just suffered from Russian fatalism; in her case, like it was a real disease rather than an attitude toward life.

“So eat your salad and your cake,” Ivar responded in exasperation. “There will be plenty of other food. Eric assured me of it when he invited us. Every guest contributes. This is an honor to be included at one of Warren’s parties. I will have a chance to bid for plenty of work. Now be quiet, woman!”

Skip looked at his watch and laid odds that in exactly four minutes, Ludmilla would announce that she had a headache. As an only child he had learned to entertain himself with assorted diversions.

“So what is this connection between a fancy architect and a chicken farmer?” Ludmilla persisted.

“Broker. Warren Johanson buys chickens from local farmers, packs them into wooden crates, and trucks them to New York where he sells them. He is from the same village as Lindstroms’. They are close like kin in this country.”

“Ah. Do you know of the wife? She is Swedish, surely. I suppose everyone will speak the language in my presence.”

“Ludmilla, stop,” Ivar said sharply.

“I thought we were Americans now,” Skip interjected.

“Smart mouth,” Ludmilla admonished. “Citizens, yes, but your blood

is Russian and Swedish. Not to forget.”

“More Swedish than Russian, I hope,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What is that?” Ivar gazed at his son in the rear view mirror.

Skip shook his head, his expression innocent.

“Ivar, the air has changed and my head is beginning to hurt,” Ludmilla whined.

Skip checked his watch. He had the timing of her act down to the second.

“Eh, Lish! The key is still in the ignition!” Eric yelled through his open window.

The girl paid no heed. She ran across the circular dirt drive, passing the three oaks shading the front of the cottage, and onto the grassy stretch leading to the river beyond the chicken coop.

Watching through the windshield, Abigail Lindstrom smiled at the sight of her daughter zigzagging northwest between the low stone terrace wall and Warren’s garden. Kay hadn’t even secured her scissors before Lish had been out of the car and off.

“Always in such a hurry to be moving, our *kara barn*,” Eric said fondly.

“Lish is like you, dear,” Abigail said, opening her door.

His long oval face broke into a grin. “Not entirely, *alskling*.” He winked at his wife. “Your part is also of notice in our daughter.”

Abigail smiled affectionately. Their girls had inherited her Fuller red hair rather than Eric’s white blondness, but then the genes had mixed considerably. Lish’s complexion was a fairer shade of her father’s golden beige; Kay had her mother’s creamy, pink skin. Instead of Abigail’s soft brown eyes, Kay had received Eric’s brilliant blue ones, a color Lish likened to cornflower, a shade in her crayon set. Of medium stature, ten year old Kay’s figure promised a comparable voluptuousness to her mother’s.

Lish resembled her father in physique and personality. Tall, slender and well-coordinated, she was full of energy and had a predilection to tease with a very subtle sense of humor. Eric joked that Lish was his “son,” not with a sense of yearning, but with pride. Beneath a constant banter, father and daughter were very close.

Both Eric and his younger brother, Alaric, a widower with no children, had rare attitudes toward women. Although not a tomboy, Lish was primarily interested in traditionally male activities, and her father and uncle encouraged her. Fascinated with balance and symmetry, Lish liked to build structures. Whereas Alaric indulged Kay with dolls, he had kept Lish stocked with blocks, and later, with Lincoln logs, tinker toys and an erector set. Eric had begun teaching an eight year old Lish the rudiments of carpentry.

Early on, sweet-natured Kay had discovered reading and could stay curled for hours engrossed in a book. Lish was a good student, indicating that she read comprehensively, but she was a “picture” person. As a youngster, she had spent hours coloring, and not stamped images of trees and flowers. She had drawn her own shapes with various art tools to enhance the images; images which had eventually changed into buildings, detailed with intricate wall work and elaborate window treatments. Eric hoped Lish would take over his cabinet shop, but Abigail concurred with Alaric who recognized the girl’s true genius. Lish would become an architect like he was.

Abigail waved to Nisse, Warren’s wife, who had shouted a greeting. Carrying a platter laden with picnic-ware, Nisse disappeared around the Johanson cottage toward the back of the nine-acre parcel where Abigail knew tables had been set up.

“I suppose I will have to carry *her* share *as usual*,” Kay announced to her mother. She slammed the door on the Oldsmobile 98 sedan.

Abigail favored her younger daughter a conciliatory smile. She had never understood why Lish and Kay couldn’t get along better since each was so much like parents who were very compatible. Despite dissimilar backgrounds, she and Eric had a solid friendship girded with a passionate bond.

“Take the sack of chips, Kay. Your father will carry the beans, and I’ll bring the brownies and rolls.” Abigail peered at the other cars in the side yard. “Carlsons are here and Helgersens. I don’t recognize the Ford.”

Eric paused in opening the trunk to examine the Ford. “Tosruds,” he said. “Ivar is a general contractor who often fills his cabinet requirements from our shop. Alaric recently asked Tosrud to bid on projects.”

“Of course. I recognize the name from the purchase orders and his

prompt checks.” Abigail, with the assistance of a secretary, handled the business matters of the cabinet shop. “It’s unusual for a general to pay so quickly.”

“Goodwill, Abby. Ivar in no *dumbom*. An association with Alaric can keep him plenty busy.” Eric glanced at Kay. “He has a son around Lish’s age.”

“What does he look like?” Kay inquired. She was already interested in boys. Lish was two years older, but she still considered boys as dopes.

“See for yourself,” Eric said. “Ivar brought his wife and Skip with him.”

“You mean he’s a drip?” Non-committal answers meant a polite way of avoiding the adage “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say it,” one of her father’s favorite pieces of advice.

“No, I don’t mean that. Skip is gangly like boys his age, but he has nice manners. *Ja?*”

“Oh, Father!” Disgusted, Kay flounced off in the direction of the Johansons’ cottage.

“What did I say?” Eric asked his wife.

Abigail laughed.

“Teen years are worse than this, *karaste?*”

“You have *no* idea, Eric.”

She’s really tall, Skip thought, watching the girl streak across the grass past what had been pointed out to him by Warren as the chicken coop. At least the person looked female. Guys didn’t wear white shorts and orange terry cloth pullovers. He stood up and addressed his father.

“Mind if I take a walk? I won’t go very far. Just kind of check out the place?”

“Never mind. You stay with us,” Ludmilla said.

But Ivar had also observed the girl and his son’s attention on her. “Go on, Skip. Just stay in hearing distance, eh?”

Skip got his father’s message. They often shared these secrets. Ludmilla would still have him in diapers if it meant she could prevent him from growing up.

At the clearing by the dark river, Lish finally lost the horde of gnats

that had pestered her through the pines. Unless the sun was directly overhead, the dense border of mature trees on both sides shaded the brown-tinged water.

The narrow bank was a soft terrain strewn with rocks so she picked her way carefully around the swamp maples to the wide spot where it was safe to swim. She was forbidden to do so alone, but had worn her bathing suit beneath her clothes because later her dad would join her. Kay disdained the river, deeming it too cold and too dirty.

Lish picked up a flat pebble and scudded it across the surface, pleased when it skimmed three times before sinking.

Standing on the bank behind her, Skip said, "I can do that."

She jumped and spun around hollering, "This is private property and you're trespassing!"

"I am not. I'm a guest just like you."

Lish angrily regarded him. Invited or not, the boy had sneaked up on her. "Nobody has children who come to these things except my family."

"Wrong. Tosruds do. Me." Skip decided that this girl would be as tall as he was if she didn't stop growing soon. He was 6'1", already an inch taller than his father, but she was almost at eye level. And rude, but pretty. Very pretty. In spite of her size, she was definitely nice to look at.

"Well, who are you?" Lish demanded, her manner still uncivil.

"I could ask you the same thing."

"But I asked first. I was here first. You're the intruder."

Skip smiled. Girls responded favorably to his smile. Something about the creases in his cheeks, which his mother referred to by the babyish name of dimples. "I'm Skip Tosrud," he said amiably.

"Swedish 100%, eh? I'm not. My mother is a Brahmin. Do you know what that is?"

"Sure, old Boston. Way back. And I'm not all Swedish, either. My mother is Russian."

Lish became less truculent. "Seems you're not a complete dope, then."

"Dope?" Skip curled his lip in a scowl. "You know who you look like? Dooley!"

"Tsk. I really don't care." Lish turned her back on him to contemplate the river. Most of the water hit only as high as your knees or waist, but darker spots on the surface indicated the much deeper areas.

Skip was furious at the way she had dismissed him. “Dooley is an Irish setter that belongs to a friend of mine. Your hair is the same color as his dog’s.”

“You have friends? Not only are you a dope, but you’re a *dumb* dope. How could you have friends? And your hair is that icky blond color that always looks dirty.”

“You’re really skinny!” He shouted.

“So are you! And your face is bony!”

“Your face is funny looking!”

Lish turned to him and said calmly, “At least my face has character. Yours is like a skeleton as in dead.”

Skip stared at her, finally speechless. He had always gotten along with others. This girl was being hostile for no reason.

Smiling at his surrender, Lish moved closer to him. “Did you bring your swimming suit?” She asked nicely.

Skip narrowed his eyes, leery of her sudden change in behavior. “No. Can we swim here?”

“Oh, yes. The water looks murky, but it’s only from the tree bark that falls in. Sediment shifting on the bottom causes more cloudiness. It’s actually very clean. I think I will go in right now.” Lish peered at him, adding, “I often swim nude.”

Blood simultaneously rushed to Skip’s face and penis, leaving him dizzy. “You do?” He squeaked, crossing one leg in front of the other to disguise the bulge in his jeans.

“Want to swim with me?”

“Now?” His voice cracked.

“Sure,” Lish said nonchalantly.

She made a motion to unbutton her shorts, but paused to watch him. Skip’s eyes were glued to her hands on her waistband.

“Oh, by the way, there are snapping turtles,” she said.

“Uh, how big?” He didn’t move his eyes.

“6, maybe 7 inches in diameter. They do like to ‘snap’ if they come around. Pickrill, too.” Lish unfastened the button.

Skip’s mouth fell open. He swallowed a couple times to alleviate the dryness before saying, “Pickrill? What’s a pickrill?”

“Fish, dope.”

He let that one pass. She was taking off her clothes and he would allow her to make all kinds of wisecracks. “So, what’s the big deal?”

“Pickrill wait in the weeds. They’re real sneaky because they remain stock-still like sticks waiting for a smaller fish to swim by. Then, they dart out and nab dinner.” Lish lunged her fingers into his chest.

His concentration broken, Skip yelped.

Lish went on blithely. “You take your chances when you swim in this water. When you least suspect it, you might be bitten. If you’re naked, it’s an even greater risk.” She stared in challenge at him. “I’m brave because I’ve done it before, but I don’t suppose you are, being as you’re such a dope.”

“You think I’m afraid to swim in that water without my clothes on? Oh, yeah?” Goaded by her dare, Skip forgot about his erection and started unbuttoning his short-sleeved shirt. He’d show her who was brave, not only about swimming, but about going in nude. He was proud of his physique that he had started to develop at age ten when his father had begun taking him on job sites and teaching him the basics of carpentry. During the summer months now he worked full time. Skip handled with skill the tools he had thus learned, and he had solid muscles on his angular frame. He was a strong swimmer, too, frequently doing laps during the evening at a city pool and joining in races with a couple of his buddies who also had daytime jobs.

“Elisabeth?” Abigail’s voice sounded faintly from beyond the thick foliage. “Is the Tosrud fellow with you? We’re getting ready to eat. Come up to the cottage.”

“It won’t happen for an hour. The chicken can’t possibly be done, but, oh, well.” Lish casually secured her shorts. “Guess we’ll have to postpone our swim.”

“I’ll hold you to it, uh, Elisabeth,” Skip replied, closing his shirt.

“My word is good, *Tos-rude*, and I have a life saving certificate if you get in too deep.”

“You *would*,” he shot back.

“But why I’d want to save a dope such as yourself – ”

“Elisabeth! Answer me!” Abigail yelled.

“Coming, Mother! Both of us!” Lish smiled smugly at her companion. “Now, follow me so that you don’t get lost. And my name is not

‘Elisabeth.’”

Skip stared at the redhead’s back and shook his head. What kind of girl was she? Talking so nasty, but in the next breath willing to strip off her clothes? And hadn’t her mother called her “Elisabeth?”

Girls liked him and he’d had a girlfriend since the beginning of junior high. In fact, last weekend, his latest, (frankly, everybody’s “latest” – the girl had a reputation), Sue Gellert had claimed that his craggy brows, characteristic of Ivar’s, were sexy, and his angular features weren’t sharp like Jeanie Berecki said, but were ruggedly handsome. But the best part of Skip’s face, Sue had declared, were his dreamy blue eyes. A positive bit of Ludmilla’s legacy, he conceded. Then, because her parents had gone to a baseball game at Fenway Park that Saturday afternoon, Sue had allowed him plenty of liberties while they were stretched out on her back porch glider. Girls definitely liked him except this one.

“How old are you?” He inquired, trudging behind Lish. Sue had nice curves. This one looked completely flat and despite her height, probably young.

“Old enough.”

“Meaning, you’re just a kid.”

Lish stopped abruptly and Skip, watching his feet so as not to trip on a rock or tree root, walked right into her. To not lose balance, his arms flew out and automatically wrapped around her chest.

She wasn’t so flat – his forearms were pressed against solid bumps. Skip’s erection returned.

Lish thrust up her elbows and broke his hold. “What the hell do you think you’re doing!” She roared as she turned to face him.

“Uh, why did you stop walking? Girls shouldn’t swear.” She had the strangest green eyes, like olives, but with black edges, and a tilt on the tip of her nose, which didn’t fit with her tough image.

“I’m fifteen,” she lied, “and I use all kinds of swear words and I know what they all mean. I’ve worked in my father’s shop. The men forget I’m around.”

“Gee, I thought you were younger,” he said. “There could be hope you’d develop a decent body, but you’re getting too old to fill out much more. Swinging a hammer might help pump up your chest, but for a girl, I guess you’ll always be on the skinny, flat side.”

“What?” Her eyes sparked. “What?” She repeated, sucking in her cheeks and biting them.

Skip grinned, thoroughly amused. His comments had really fixed her, the smartie; she was obviously flustered. He noticed her eyes again. Gold traces had appeared in the odd green like particles of fire generated by her anger. Feeling very pleased, he said, “You can stay here, but I’m not standing around any longer with these gnats trying to crawl up my nose and onto my eyeballs.”

The grass was visible and he brushed past her to reach the yard.

Disbelieving that this ugly boy had gotten in the last word with her, Lish began to plot revenge.

Kay waited for them by the stonewall. Staring at the boy, she uttered dramatically, “Ohhh, you missed it! It was sooo disgusting.”

Lish gazed at her sister, then shifted her eyes to Skip. “Warren always has a few beers before killing the main course.”

“Huh?” Skip said, perplexed. Remembering his parents’ conversation in the car, he figured they were having chicken. The strong smell of ammonia and the cooing by the coop indicated that birds were in residence. Did the guy chop off their heads out in the yard?

“He grabs a chicken by its head and twirls it around until the neck snaps!” Kay exclaimed.

“He does it in front of everybody?” Skip said incredulously, betting that his mother threw up in front of everybody.

“Sorry you missed the show,” Lish said, “but just behave yourself and you might be invited back. There’s always another performance. Maybe you can offer to help. You look like the kind of guy who would enjoy swinging a chicken by its head.”

By a picnic table close to the cottage, Abigail called, “Go in and wash your hands!”

Kay held hers out. “I already did.”

“You’re simply too goody goody for words, Little Miss Perfect,” Lish baited.

“Lish, you’re a grimy pig!” Kay cried, swinging her fist at her.

“Uh, uh, uh!” Lish danced out of the way and ran toward the cottage.

“Oooh, I hate her!” Kay screamed.

Watching the girl's retreat, Skip asked, "What name did you just call her?"

"You mean Lish?"

He looked at the beautiful child. "Yes, Lish. A nickname?"

"I couldn't say Elisabeth when I was a toddler. 'Lish' stuck. It fits her – self-ish, stupid-ish, smart-aleck-ish."

Skip laughed. He was thinking more along the lines of "unique-ish," but the sister had a point about the "smart-aleck-ish."

"Sit with me while we eat?" Kay requested, batting her big eyes. "The three of us are the only kids."

"Yeah, okay." He grinned, registering Kay's awestruck expression. His smile worked on this young girl. "What about Lish?" He jerked his thumb at the cottage.

"Oh, that creep sister of mine. We'll probably be stuck with her."

"Yeah, she's a creep," Skip agreed, but thought, Lish is also damned cute.

Later that night, Lexington, Massachusetts

Kay entered her sister's room, saying, "Wasn't Skip dreamy? His eyes – wow!" She sat on Lish's bed, adjusted her ankle-length pink nylon nightgown, and began brushing her long hair. "'Skeppare' is his real name and he was born on the way here from Sweden. It means 'skipper' in Swedish, which Daddy said was true. His mother wanted it to be the Russian word – he knew how to pronounce it. She would have died if it hadn't been for the captain delivering him. The captain was Greek with a terribly awful name. His father wanted to call him 'Janik.' That ended up his middle name. Now everybody just calls him 'Skip.'"

"Yak, yak. Do you ever take a breath? Skip is a pet's name like for a goldfish or a hamster or a mongrel dog. A real *dumbom*," Lish replied as she pulled on her cotton pajama top. "Kay, quit pulling out your ugly hair and leaving it on my bed." She never fussed with her own-shingled style at a length barely touching her ears.

"It's the same color as yours so you have ugly hair, too."

"And I keep it short so as to draw as little attention to it as possible. But you! The thick, fat stuff spreads over your back like a tumor."

“I hate you, Lish!” Kay cried, running from the bedroom.

Lish chuckled. Her sister was an easy mark because she was so sensitive. Dad teased Kay, but gently, because, like their mother, she could be quickly reduced to tears. Not her, though. Eric was unmerciful in his bedeviling. Lish had learned her lessons from a master and knew how to serve it threefold.

She sat down on the stool at her drafting table and adjusted the overhead lamp. Mom would yell soon for her to go to bed, but she wanted to work on her latest project, a series of doors and panels incorporated with ART MODERNE themes. Uncle Alaric had recently taken her and Kay to an exhibit of the period, one in vogue during the twenties and thirties, at the Museum of Fine Arts. The symmetrical, rectilinear lines and bold, clean colors, particularly from later in the era, had fascinated her. Uncle Alaric had explained that it was the influence of Cubism. After looking at library reference books, Lish had found that the feminine garland and water jet patterns of earlier Modernism held an equal appeal.

As she sketched a rigid lightning bolt, she thought about Skip and Kay’s silly description of him. His mouth was too broad, his nose too long, and his face too thin to be considered handsome. He lived in a nice, little town, though. Duxbury was next to Plymouth on the south shore outside the city.

Her family’s quaint saltbox was in Lexington, a historic town part of Greater Boston. Her grandparents, Winthrop and Libbie, lived down the block and her uncle lived several streets away. Fullers had lived here for generations.

Skip’s mother had been a fuddy duddy who frowned a lot and kept to herself, but his father had been okay. Ivar had shared in the ritual drinking of the spicy *glug* before the meal, and had added a few of his own jokes to those offered by the other men.

Lish picked up a silver crayon to add color and giggled out loud. The look on Skip’s face as she removed her clothes on the riverbank had been priceless. When she had announced that she planned to take a dip, he had eagerly said he’d join her, but Ludmilla pointed out that he had no swimsuit. Eric and Abigail exchanged amused glances before her father had offered his own to the boy, who, in turn, had eyed her slyly. Skip had changed awfully quickly in the cottage, and Lish could not believe how

dumb he had been to think she might really swim nude in front of him. Kay had tagged along, but as Lish had expected, she'd squealed at the gnat attack and fled back to the yard.

She grudgingly acknowledged that Skip had been a good swimmer. He had beaten her in their race, but only because he was a boy and stronger.

"It's midnight! Bed!" Abigail shouted from the bottom of the staircase.

Lish set aside a new sheet of vellum. She had to brush her teeth because she didn't want cavities like her best friend, Drucilla Rowe Otis, who, in addition to her dual blue-blood lineage, had inherited soft enamel.

Dru, as thin as Lish, but of average height, had been Lish's very best friend forever. They shared everything, and Dru felt the same about boys as Lish – they were all dopes. Dru would love the story about Skip.

## Chapter 2

Abigail lit a candle in the dark living room. October was late for a nor'easter of this intensity, and usually a hurricane's effect was not as great inland, but this one's destructive force had knocked out the power lines. Rain had assaulted the city for hours, and she wondered if water would seep into the basement. Before the phones had gone out, her mother had called to say that their house, at a lower elevation, had an inch seepage, but they would likely have had a foot if Eric hadn't improved the grade on the property and repaired the cellar's foundation.

Eric had done wonders with her parents' centuries-old federal-style house and theirs, too. The aged frame saltbox they owned had been in dilapidated condition when Abigail's second cousin offered it to them for an unbelievably low price. "To keep it in the family" had been cousin Herbert's explanation. The young couple could never have afforded to live in Lexington otherwise.

Abigail ran her fingers across the cool marble of the fireplace mantle. With little money and a lot of skill, Eric had superbly restored the structure and the interior.

A bloodcurdling screech and Kay's terrified scream startled Abigail. Unable to do homework in the darkness, Lish had cajoled her sister into playing hide-and-seek. Typically, she was taking to her role as seeker with relish.

The wind rattled the bolted shutters and Abigail shivered. Since the furnace was off she should stack kindling and strike a fire in the hearth. Eric always chuckled at her Yankee terminology for fireplace.

They had been an unlikely couple to meet. Fourteen summers ago, she had been a nineteen year old who had just completed her first year at a local liberal arts college. Twenty-five year old Eric had been one of the "construction workers," as her civil servant father had collectively referred to the crew remodeling the Fuller kitchen. Abigail had lingered around the handsome Swede constructing and installing cabinets, discovering that he was not so representative of the crude stereotype implied by her father. Eric liked classical music and showed little interest in sports. His reading tastes tended toward philosophy and history, loftier

subject matters than her own choices. He might drink a beer at the end of the day, but preferred to sip cognac.

Then there had been his hands. Eric's long, sturdy fingers with square nails and the callused surface of his broad palms fascinated Abigail. They were capable hands, which projected strength and purpose, whether he was gripping a hammer or had them spread on a board as he measured. To her, his hands bespoke a secure individual, proficient at not just his craft, but in dealing with life. She yearned for the man with hands like that to touch her.

Abigail fell in love without ever having been on a date with Eric Lindstrom. When the cabinetry phase neared completion, she had become desperate, having decided that her background must put off Eric. The Fullers were middle class economically, but her genealogy apparently intimidated the immigrant, and he had no intention to pursue his obvious attraction for her. Or so she had thought. Summoning her courage, she had haltingly attempted to make a date with him, and he had laughed gently, hushing her with a bold kiss and saying that she had to give him a chance to ask *her* first.

Her family had initially expressed disapproval, but she and Eric had continued to see each other. Her brother was first to be won over, then, eventually, her parents. An uneducated, but intelligent man, Eric had proved his worthiness by demonstrating not only how much he cherished the Fuller daughter, but by pragmatically submitting for consideration the healthy balance sheet of his growing business. They had been married less than a year after meeting, and she loved him ardently to the present day.

Abigail squinted at the mantle to see the bracket clock and, as always, admired the custom made piece before reading its hands. For a hobby, Alaric designed and built the centuries-old wooden case style, notable for a domed top and brass-carrying handle.

Eric had called several hours ago to notify her that he was closing the shop early because of the weather. According to a transistor radio in the kitchen emitting more static than news, it sounded like many of the streets were flooded, but his four-wheel drive truck maneuvered through any condition. Abigail expected her husband to be home soon.

Eric stood on the bottom wooden plank of the stairs leading to the basement. Abigail stood behind him.

He turned on a flashlight and played it over the water. "I can't tell how deep it is, but you can bet the washer and dryer are ruined. I'm going to check around."

"Wait until someone can pump it out, dear. There could be a current."

"The electricity is off."

"Don't, anyway. Please?" Abigail had the worst feeling about this.

"I'll be safe. My work boots have heavy rubber soles."

"You don't need to get into the basement for any reason except that you want to. It's not a good enough reason."

Eric kissed her solidly. "But *kara*, I will get the propane blow torch from my workshop. You can use it to cook hamburgers for dinner."

In spite of her fears, Abigail laughed.

Eric sloshed into the water. "It's over the top of my boots," he said in disgust. "I have expensive wood stacked on those lower shelves."

"You can't save it. Just come back right now."

A few seconds later, Abigail heard a crackling noise and a heavy splash. Eric failed to respond to her frantic calling.

Forbidden by her hysterical mother to enter the basement, Lish left Abigail and Kay to moan on the top step. She wrapped in her father's rain slicker and slogged to the fire station located half a mile from their house.

Afterward, an investigator informed the anguished family that the electricity was not off, but a short in the power line had suspended service. During the storm, an overhead light socket sustained damage and a live wire had drooped. With his wet legs grounding him, Eric had merely to brush the top of his head against the wire to be instantly electrocuted.

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In a back pew, Skeppare Tosrud sat with his parents and listened solemnly to the Lutheran minister delivering Eric Lindstrom's eulogy. The church was packed with mourners, but right before the service had begun, Skip had glimpsed Lish and Kay with their mother, uncle and other relatives come from a side door near the chancel. People had been invited to the house following the interment, and he hoped to have a

moment with the girls, in particular Lish.

He hadn't forgotten the tall redhead's joke that Sunday last summer in New Hampshire. As he had held his breath and cursed his erection, Lish had casually stripped her clothes, only to reveal a very proper bright green swimsuit beneath. He had felt as big a dope as she had called him. And he should have known better. At dinner, while Lish had been absent getting a second helping of Ludmilla's cake, Kay had informed him that her liar sister was only twelve. Cheated of the sight of her nude, Skip had studied the girl, determining that she would not be strictly a pole. Her body was slim, but it promised to be feminine. Absorbed in examining her figure, he had suddenly realized, to further embarrassment, that she was eyeing him knowingly, her expression mischievous. He had flung himself into the water and almost lost Eric's loaned trunks, which were too big for him. He had freely beaten her racing, but the defeat hadn't seemed to bother her as much as he had wished. Lish Lindstrom had disturbed more than his day. For weeks afterward, she had lingered in his dreams and had given fuel to more than one sexual fantasy.

Skip drained his punch, placed the empty mug on the end of the buffet table, then made a path through the crowd gathered in the Lindstroms' house. He overheard several comments about the sunny day being a blessing. Abigail was having enough trouble maintaining her composure without having to deal with the memory of rain, too.

Skip spied Lish with a cute, short brunette. Kay didn't seem to be around. Pulling at his collar, buttoned to hold a tie that he was not used to wearing, he took a deep breath and approached Lish.

"Who is *he*?" Dru whispered to Lish, her hazel eyes glued to the sturdy young man moving slowly in their direction.

Lish's mind numbly registered Skip. She ached for her father and nothing else held any importance. She replied indifferently, "That's the guy I met last summer in New Hampshire. The Swedish *dumbom*, remember?"

"Remembered, remembered," Dru echoed, self-consciously smoothing her chin length bouffant bob that she tried to keep straight with huge rollers. Her naturally curly hair rarely cooperated unless the humidity was

low like today.

For the first time in their lives, the friends differed on a subject. Lish continued to view boys as adversaries. But when one developed a mad crush on Dru at the beginning of the school year, she had amended her attitude and come to the conclusion that they were not so awful. Granted, Timmy Paterson was fat and wore glasses, but he wrote the very best love notes, and Dru prided herself in basing a boy's worth on more than his looks, just like the teen magazines advised. This guy staring at them was a genuine dreamboat, plus older, too, and, his aim seemed to be their position.

Skip halted before Lish who sagged against the wall, her eyes downcast.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," Dru responded with enthusiasm.

Lish shot her friend a dirty look before regarding Skip. He was here to offer sympathy, she reminded herself, and he was doing it to be nice, so she should be gracious as her mother had severely instructed her. Fullers grieved in private, Abigail had counseled, despite her own features and mannerisms emanating anguish like a beacon.

"My friend Drucilla," Lish offered in greeting. She recalled that the last time she had seen her father's blue swimming trunks, Skip had been wearing them, and the recollection was inducing an uncontrollable desire to cry. Alarmed, she muttered, "Excuse me," and started past Skip to seek privacy.

Unfamiliar with grief, but feeling a deep need to comfort her, Skip awkwardly held out his arms. The unexpected gesture startled Lish and she hesitated. Encouraged, Skip widened his arms.

Lish stared at the boy. He had compassion, just like Dad did – like Dad *had* under his teasing nature. She stepped into Skip's embrace and broke into weeping.

"It's okay, *kara*, I understand," he murmured by her ear, using the Swedish endearment. Lish was so tall, but her height was not objectionable. This girl belonged in his arms, Skip thought, and squelched a self-conscious laugh at the corny notion.

"It will never be okay again. You can't possibly understand that," Lish said, but was finding solace here with Skip whereas for the past three

days there had been no one who had made her feel better with their words or their touch.

“I know. I just meant ...” Skip wisely decided that his best course was silence. He gathered her closer to his chest, then wormed his hand into his pocket for the handkerchief that his mother had insisted he carry. For once, he was grateful for Ludmilla’s advice. He wished he could make it okay. It was important that Lish be okay –

“Skip!” Kay said.

Lish abruptly withdrew.

“I saw your parents and asked where you were.” Kay studied her sister curiously. Hard-hearted Lish was rubbing away tears, a rarity. She and Mom had sobbed intermittently for hours. Deep, vocalized anger at Daddy had dominated Lish’s mood.

“How are you?” Skip said politely, but his sight stayed on Lish. Her irises were dark; no gold glistened in their depths.

Taking deep breaths to control her emotions, Lish pressed the side of her hand to her dripping nose.

“Here.” He held out his handkerchief.

“Thank you.” Lish wiped her eyes and glanced at Dru who wore a silly expression. “Come on, dopey,” she said to her friend.

“Oh, right now?” Dru answered. “Couldn’t we visit?”

“Suit yourself,” Lish said and, avoiding eye contact with Skip, walked away.

“She’s embarrassed,” Kay said. “Lish hasn’t cried before. Not in front of me or Mom, anyway.”

“Really?” Skip lost sight of Lish when she entered the hall leading to the kitchen.

“It’s true. Isn’t it, Dru?” Kay looked at her sister’s friend.

“No, it isn’t. Lish just doesn’t cry around you. I’d better join her. My parents made it my duty today.” Hastily she added, “Of course, we’re very best friends. I *want* to be with her. This is a very bad time.” She shrugged at the boy, wishing circumstances were different. Skip wasn’t exactly handsome, but his face was very appealing. Dru ventured he already knew how to kiss and could give her valuable lessons.

Kay tucked her small hand into Skip’s larger one. “Join me,” she said plaintively.

He smiled at the young girl. Kay was a nice kid. “You bet I will,” he replied.

Ivar and Ludmilla remained another hour, so Skip remained with Kay as she moved around, talking with those who had come to pay their respects. He didn’t see Lish, but his eyes never stopped sweeping the rooms for her. And, despite good intentions to stay in contact with Elisabeth Lindstrom, a distance separated them, other girls attracted him. Their paths did not cross again.

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Alaric Lindstrom was a blurred physical copy of his late brother, Eric. His muscle tone had less definition; his facial planes had softer angles; his eyes were a less brilliant blue. His intelligence was not superior, but he had been given the opportunity to pursue an education. Eric had worked to make possible their elderly father’s dream of college for Alaric. But no resentment or rivalry had existed. Eric had loved his physical labor as much as Alaric enjoyed his more cerebral vocation.

From a personal vantage, Eric had lived a far happier life. Alaric had married in his late twenties, and his bride of ten months had been pregnant with their first child when she had contracted polio. Katrina and the baby had died within thirty hours of diagnosis.

Alaric had developed liaisons with a number of women, but until recently he hadn’t considered marrying again. Eric’s family had become his, too, the daughters like his own children, and he had always been fond of Abigail. Now, six months after Eric’s premature death, he had a proposition for his brother’s widow.

“Abigail, how are you, dear?” Alaric inquired, taking her hands in his. In the past few weeks they had been having dinner with increasing frequency and hadn’t always included the girls.

“Fine as usual. Hate the drizzle outside, but then I will hate it for the rest of my life. Let me take your coat.”

Alaric sighed and followed her from the vestibule to the parlor where a fire warmed the room. He couldn’t take his brother’s place in her heart, but she and the girls needed him. In his own way, he needed them in return. It was logical that they marry and form a family.

Abigail sat on one of the sofas and looked expectantly at Alaric who had remained standing.

“The girls are here?”

“Lish is with Dru, practicing in the Otis basement. They’ve decided to try out for the girls’ track team when they get to high school because Lish set the broad-jump record in gym class yesterday, and Dru says she likes to run.”

“They’re in 7<sup>th</sup> grade.”

“They claim they need to start preparing early.”

Alaric laughed. “She’s a *karaktar*, that one.”

Abigail nodded. “And Kay is also at a friend’s. You’re here in the daytime. Did you wish to see the girls? I would have arranged for them to be home.”

“Not at all, *kara du*. I came on purpose at this time so that we could be alone.”

Abigail had been expecting this conversation. Alaric was very proper in his behavior toward her, but his gestures suggested courtship. A touch at the small of her back to guide her, a gentle squeeze of her hand, an affectionate kiss on her cheek – outwardly platonic, but maintained a fraction too long. An attitude, a look – Alaric was wooing her and she wasn’t adverse to his suit. Beside herself, no one had been closer to Eric than Alaric. The senior Lindstroms had passed on years before. Alaric was nearly as much a father as Eric had been to the girls. It was natural for them to be together.

Alaric cleared his throat. “As you’re aware, I am very fond of you, Lish and Kay. Like yours, my heart was broken when Eric ...” He paused and cleared his throat again. “Ah, I am lonely, Abby. There are women who would comfort me, but I am too old to seek one simply for the pleasure of her body, and I am inclined to pursue only one for a more lasting commitment.”

Abigail smiled to encourage him. “I’m lonely, too. The void created by Eric’s loss, well, no one can replace him, Alaric, but neither do I wish to remain by myself for the rest of my life. I’m not even close to forty.”

Alaric, four years older than she, smiled broadly. He understood her message. Abigail felt as he did. Bending on his knee, he looked up at the pretty redhead. “Will you marry me?”

Abigail leaned down and kissed him.

A flare of passion surprised them both, and they lingered before drawing apart.

“We’ll celebrate our decision tonight,” he said happily. “We’ll take the girls to dinner with us and announce it then.”

Her daughters adored their Uncle Alaric. Abigail believed that this would make sense to them.

Sullen-faced, Lish slumped in the back seat of the Lincoln Continental. Kay had leaned forward and rested her arms on the back of the front seat as she joined in enthusiastic conversation with her mother and uncle.

*Her major dope sister was acting like this decision was the very best thing in the whole world, Lish thought indignantly, and her mother was positively in raptures, cuddling against the man who presumed to take Dad’s place. Not too many months ago, these two had spent their days lamenting Dad’s loss. They had forgotten so quickly. Well, she hadn’t. And her thirteenth birthday fell two days after the planned wedding. They would be on their honeymoon. Both Abigail and Alaric, in their newfound bliss, had forgotten her important passage to teens.*

“Oh, Lish,” Abigail said excitedly, “I want you and Kay to be my bridesmaids.”

Kay exclaimed, “Oh, yes! I will, Mom.”

“Do I have a choice?” Lish said petulantly.

Alaric adjusted the rear view mirror to see her. Clearly she was displeased with their announcement. “We would like for you to be a part of this, Lish,” he said. “Your mother and I have strong hopes to mend the hurts, but we need your help and Kay’s for our plans to be successful.”

Lish regarded him in the mirror. “You have each other so you won’t be needing me for anything.”

“Oh, Elisabeth, that’s not true!” Abigail cried, turning to gaze at her. “You and Kay are the primary concerns here. Why, we won’t marry if it’s too upsetting for you.”

Heavy silence descended on the vehicle.

Burdened by the guilt her mother had thrust upon her, Lish said woodenly, “Do as you want. I’ll go along.” *But never in my heart, she promised herself, never.*

## Chapter 3

1965

Boston

Ivar Tosrud shook his head in despair. “When we became citizens, I never dreamed that one day my only son would be required to defend the privilege. I settled here with my wife and new born child, hoping to find a world rich with opportunity and I did. I did! Now, it is all at risk. Everything!”

Alaric Lindstrom tilted back in his executive’s chair and nodded sympathetically. In June, Skip had graduated from high school and in accordance with the law, on his eighteenth birthday in early August he had registered with the draft board. Shortly afterward, he had been notified to report for a physical, and subsequently had been classified 1A. Now, in mid-September, his draft summons had arrived.

“I say, ‘Skeppare, go to college. They have a deferment for students. Son, you can work around your class schedule.’ He wants nothing to do with it, but his science grades, Alaric. A’s in biology and chemistry. But he dismisses book work as a waste, claims he has learned everything he needs to run a construction company. Such a *skarp mun*, eh?”

Alaric smiled. Ivar’s description of his son as a smart aleck held both irritation and pride. In the past year he had worked with Tosrud Construction on two major renovation projects and had often dealt with Skip. The young man frequently represented his father on job sites. His grades were acceptable, Skip had said, but he had opted for a work-study program senior year. Attending college held no interest. Rather, he intended to immerse himself fully in all aspects of the building business until Uncle Sam made a move, which would probably redirect his course. Alaric had disagreed with Skip’s attitude toward a higher education, but he had kept his opinion to himself. Eric had never been interested in formal education, either, but had been very intelligent and a master at his craft. Skip reminded Alaric of his brother.

Ivar sighed deeply. “His mother is beside herself. The woman is convinced that Skeppare will be dead within a month.”

“I understand that boot camp is, what? Six, eight weeks? They don’t

fire real ammo at recruits,” Alaric said blandly. Ludmilla was a hypochondriac-bore, and he and Abigail did not socialize with the Tosruds. Ivar believed that his relationship with Penny Bennett, an attractive, fortyish divorcee who worked as a bookkeeper for an excavation sub-contractor, was a secret, but everyone in the trade knew about the liaison. No one begrudged Ivar the happiness.

“The food, Alaric,” Ivar exclaimed. “Ludmilla is positive the food will poison her son.”

“Ah.” Alaric maintained an understanding expression, but mentally rolled his eyes at the woman’s ridiculous remark. “And how does Skip feel?”

“I think he is excited by the chance to escape Boston for a while, but is hiding it to spare his mother. She has always tried to exercise a tight rein on him.” Ivar paused, then continued with admiration, “Though Skeppare seems to manage around it. I have overheard my crew ragging him more than once about his exploits with the girls.”

Alaric considered tall, muscular Skip with his thick, sun-bleached hair, arresting blue eyes and perpetual tan. His looks alone would favor him with the ladies; but he also had a genuine, easy manner touched with a hint of a scoundrel. Alaric had known less handsome men of the same personality type whom women found irresistible. Skip would be lethal to plenty of female hearts.

Alaric rose from behind his desk and offered his hand. “I hope I see Skip before he leaves, but in case I don’t, please offer him my best wishes.”

“*Tack*,” Ivar said sadly in thanks.

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With a neat flick, Valerie Moreau tripped the book cover over the match and brought the flame to her cigarette. She inhaled and expelled the smoke with a satisfied sigh.

“Give me one, Val,” Skip said. He stretched his naked body and bumped his toe on the pine footboard. “Shit, what’s wrong with a plain old bed frame on casters?”

“You have no class, Tos,” she replied, throwing him the pack of cigarettes from the wicker night stand.

“Yeah, and you do.” Skip grinned to soften his sarcasm. Valerie’s apartment was furnished in a quirky mix of styles purchased during impulsive spending sprees. He took a drag on his cigarette, breathing in her musky scent that permeated the bedding and his own skin.

Valerie leaned down and ran her tongue up the length of his semi-soft penis. It twitched at her attention. “You never get enough, do you?” She said, laughing.

Skip laughed, too. Valerie was twenty years old and the only child of Tosrud Construction’s main drywall sub-contractor. She was a full-time, paid employee at her father’s company, but only worked when she felt like it. This summer, when Skip was free to join her, her lunch hour lasted all afternoon.

He noticed the stark difference in color on the top of her head where the roots were growing out. Valerie’s long hair was a medium brown, but she bleached it platinum. With a complexion prone to blemishes, she carefully blended a heavy make-up to minimize outbreaks and sunbathed to maintain a concealing tan. To enhance the color of her prominent, myopic eyes she wore blue contact lenses. Valerie had average looks, but he hadn’t been drawn to the girl for her face. Idly, Skip played with one of her heavy breasts. Valerie was no more than 5'2", but her shapely bosom strained thirty-nine inches on a tape measure. Her short rib cage tapered to twenty-four inches at her waist before flaring at the widest point around her hips to thirty-five inches. Valerie’s legs were chunky, but no man ever paid any attention past her chest, and she flaunted her biggest asset by wearing the tightest sweaters and T-shirts.

After a semester of college and a stint living in Manhattan, Valerie had returned to Boston. Last spring, her father, fed up with her lazy lifestyle of sleeping all day and partying all night, had given her an ultimatum. Valerie had been agreeable to his conditions to work as a gofer for the drywall business, but had also insisted that she be subsidized in an apartment.

The job suited her perfectly. She loved to hang around construction sites allowing the men to ogle her. Connecting with Skip had been like fate, and they enjoyed a mutual lust for one another.

Skip recognized that Valerie was spoiled and selfish; despite a coy, dependent attitude, she was about as helpless as a female lion. She also

had fake IDs to buy liquor and was completely uninhibited in bed. At eighteen years of age, his requirements for companionship were simple.

His stomach growled. Food for lunch had been overlooked today. "It's past five," he said, "you want to get something to eat?"

She crushed her cigarette in an ashtray set on a pillow. "Bratwurst and beer at the Rathskeller, then back here for more of this." Widening her mouth, she encompassed his penis.

"Val, I'm going to miss you."

She released him and raised her head. "Become fond of Rosy Palm and the Five Fingers, Skeppare, because that's all the loving you'll get in boot camp."

Skip sat up, swung his legs off the bed, and retrieved his pants from the floor. "I've never been outside of Massachusetts except to visit New Hampshire. Now I'm going half way across the country to an Army base in Louisiana."

"You were an asshole to enlist for four years. Two years as a draftee, and you would have been done." Valerie was miffed at Skip for his zealous interest in military duty. He should be more upset about leaving her and should have done everything possible to return to her quickly. She wasn't ready to get married, but Skip was her insurance policy for when she did decide to settle down.

"More choices this way," he said. "I figure I'll run a construction company for the rest of my life, but right now I'd like adventure."

"I'm not enough for you?"

Skip glanced over his shoulder. Was she ever something with those wide, pendulous breasts that could smother a guy. One of the carpenters on the Tosrud crew had slyly inquired if he was in love. Skip had nonchalantly countered, no, but his dick was. Repetition of the exchange and the resulting laughter had circulated for days.

"You're plenty enough," he said sincerely, "but I have a mother who is stifling me. I need distance so she can put things in better perspective."

Val ran her toes across his back as he leaned down to tie on his work boots. "I've a mind to call Ludmilla and tell her the truth about your volunteering."

"She'd kill the bearer of bad tidings. Don't risk it."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Valerie had street smarts, but otherwise, she was no mental giant. Skip found it difficult to believe that she had actually gone to college, even briefly. “Ludmilla will resent you if you inform her that I’ll be gone longer than what she’s geared for,” he explained.

“Huh. Do you think she likes me?”

Several Sundays ago, Skip had brought Valerie to the Tosrud house for dinner. When he had returned from driving Val home, Ludmilla had referred to Val as a tart. Since then, Val had pestered him about his mother’s impressions. He had wisely remained non-committal.

“Probably she does like you, but you know mothers. They never give a straight opinion,” Skip said, yanking on his T-shirt. Getting away from Valerie might be a good idea, too. She was becoming stifling in her own way.

#### Louisiana

During twelve weeks of basic training at Fort Polk, Skip didn’t think about his adjustment to military life, he just did as he was told. For years he had tuned out his mother’s jabber, filtering only the information mandatory to function peaceably around her. A drill instructor used worse language than Ludmilla, but his message was the same – “my way or else.” Because of his size, Skip was picked to be a squad leader, the D.I.’s choice to enforce his commands; yet Skip neither took advantage of the situation nor shirked his responsibility in keeping the others in line.

Regulation tests were memory drills and he scored well. Skip easily earned an expert rating on both the rifle and pistol ranges because, at an early age, Ivar had defied Ludmilla and taught his son the rudiments of firearms. Physically and mentally, the eighteen year old suffered little from the dehumanizing indoctrination required to make boys into fighters.

Following the completion of basic, Skip was promoted from private to private-first-class and transferred to infantry training, a six-week session at the same base. He assumed his next step, if not directly to Vietnam, would be assignment to jungle training at Fort Ord or possibly at a base in Hawaii.

But instead of orders for combat, he was approached by a captain

representing the Special Forces Division and offered the option of volunteering. Tosrud, the captain explained, was ideal material for Special Forces, a group of individuals who were intensively trained, then deployed to impart their skills to native resisters behind enemy lines. Skip had already demonstrated the qualities of mental discipline and physical ruggedness, which were crucial to the rigorous demands imposed by this type of service. The fact that he had a passable knowledge of the Russian and Swedish languages were big pluses.

Skip volunteered.

Fall, 1966

Boston

The soldier swung the duffle bag easily to his shoulder and left the men's room of South Station in Boston. His parents knew about his pending visit, but Skip had preferred not to be welcomed at the train. A year had passed since his induction and although his special training was far from finished, the Army had issued him a thirty-day leave. Prior to leaving Fort Bragg in North Carolina, he had decided that he needed to re-orient himself to civilian life without simultaneously bearing the onslaught of Ludmilla's chatter.

He strode through the cavernous building toward the subway located directly outside, ignoring the curious stares produced by his uniform: a short field jacket, khakis tucked into spit-shined combat boots and a green beret tilted on his head. He wasn't oblivious to the women eyeing him with interest; he simply showed no reaction. Occasionally, Valerie wrote mushy drivel to him, but he didn't deem himself involved with her in any special way. At the moment, he just wasn't interested in a pickup.

Skip settled on a bench in a deserted car and mulled over the changes wrought in him since the last time he had ridden the subway. His physical conditioning in basic training had been a mild workout compared to the vigorous conditioning required of Special Forces, which included meeting the standards essential for paratrooper instruction. The pre-qualifying tests demanded all of his stamina, but he had passed, both physically and mentally. The stress on attaining perfect form was a litany

in Special Forces and understandable, considering the danger of the work he would be performing.

According to his profile, drawn after intensive written exams, Skip's abilities would best be developed as a weapons leader; his cross-skill for backup, which had surprised him, would be medical. Two months of introductory training had followed. Presently, he was enrolled in schooling to achieve proficiency using multiple types of weaponry – a variety of both allied and Communist rifles, grenades, bazookas and crew-served weapons. Concurrently, he was taking medical courses to learn advanced first aid and preventive health measures. He was also in several language classes, including Russian, and felt capable of conversing with his mother. He would to keep in practice while he was at home.

Within the next year, upon mastery of his specialized skills, he would be required to pass an additional seven weeks of preliminary branch training before being assigned to an A-detachment or in Special Forces jargon, an A-team. He would become a part of a self-sufficient group of other experts like himself who would fine-hone their skills working together as a cohesive unit while at the same time learning to deal smoothly with a native population. In his case, Corporeal Tosrud would be shipped to Okinawa for the final phase of his education, and the indigenous nationality would be Vietnamese.

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Boston hasn't changed, Skip thought, circling Valerie's block in search of a parking space. Often at the end of the day on construction sites in the city, the crew would set saw horses in front of a project to insure a drop zone the next day for trucks with materials. Drivers would move the barriers and park in the reserved spots, regardless. He recalled one time a driver of a chrome plastered Cadillac who had driven up on to the sidewalk and maneuvered into a narrow space at the curb left by saw horses placed further into the street. A hotheaded cement man, due to deliver a load early in the morning, had blown his stack when he'd seen the Caddy. He had moved the sawhorses and with his heavy-duty mixer, had shoved the car out of the way. No one ever saw the car again in the vicinity. They figured it must have required towing because the

transmission would have been destroyed.

A movement caught Skip's eye. A driver on the opposite side of the street was pulling out. He swung a swift arc, aggressively cutting in front of a slower moving vehicle, and gracefully parked his old Ford Galaxy convertible. The other driver cursed him through an open window. Skip flipped him off. It was nothing personal. Boston drivers prided themselves on their rudeness and the execution of illegal U turns.

Acclimated to the warm, muggy climate of North Carolina, Skip was glad he had worn his flannel shirt tonight because Boston's fall air was nippy. Jaywalking, he reflected on the past few days of his leave. Most of his friends from high school were away at college, preparing for homecoming or mid-term exams, not that he had cared to see them. He way beyond them in maturity and these students would have nothing in common with him anymore.

Once freed of Ludmilla's cloying behavior, which had caused the usual conflict, he and Ivar had genuinely enjoyed each other's company. The old man had taken him to his favorite corner pub where they had drunk a few beers and discussed business as if Skip had never been absent. Then they had gone down to the construction yard and the crew had been as glad to see him as he was to see them. Skip realized that a big part of him missed his trade, but the disciplined soldier ingrained in him shrugged off any regrets. His decision to join Special Forces required an indefinite commitment and as long as war raged in Southeast Asia, this Green Beret would do his best to help win the conflict.

After entering Valerie's building, Skip opted to use the stairs to the eight floor of the high rise instead of the elevator and now hesitated to knock on her door. Fort Bragg was near enough to Fayetteville to provide an ample social life for the military, and like most of the other single men in his barracks, Skip paid professionals to take care of his sexual needs. His attention was devoted to learning how to survive in impossible situations and he had neither the time nor the inclination to pursue a relationship. Valerie may have signed her disjointed letters with declarations of love, and, if he had deciphered her poor spelling right, she had openly claimed that he was her boyfriend, but Skip harbored no

illusions. Val had been having plenty of fun in his absence. Not that he cared. The memory of her breasts had motivated him to call her for a date tonight, and the fact that she used to be easy. It would be great to forget annihilation tools for a few weeks and get laid until he was drained. If she still behaved the same way, Valerie was great for that activity.

Skip knocked.

She must have been waiting because she immediately swung wide the door.

He blinked. The blonde wore a pair of high-heeled pink satin mules and nothing else.

“Miss me?” Valerie inquired as she lewdly plumped her breasts.

“Holy shit!”

Before she closed the door, Skip had unzipped his pants. They barely cleared the entryway, and just outside the kitchen, they joined in a tangle on the carpet. The girl’s talents rivaled a pro’s.

Fall, 1967

North Carolina

Skip arched his back and let the hot, pulsing shower beat on his scalp. His team, A-301, had just returned from two weeks of guerilla maneuvers in a remote section of the Everglades National Park in Florida, and they had traveled directly from the exercise to their transport plane for Fort Bragg. After a year and a half of preparation, the soldiers assigned to the team were ready for action. Following leave, they would ship out for a brief orientation on Okinawa before being sent in to Vietnam.

“Pass me that fancy shampoo you use, Meatball.”

Skip squinted through a soapy haze and grinned at his favorite member of the team, Evgueni Severn, standing at the adjacent showerhead. Gene, a big, grizzled man of Russian descent, had grown up near Millinocket in Northern Maine. Before enlisting in the Army, he had worked as a carpenter and at the team’s initial meeting last year, the New Englanders’ friendship had been instantaneous.

“Sure, Bear,” Skip replied, reaching to the floor for the bottle and tossing it.

Gene proceeded to lather his crotch with a dollop of the shampoo.

“Shit, what a waste,” Skip said, rinsing his eyes. “It’s bad enough when you squander it on that prematurely gray head of yours, but on your dick?”

“If it smells good, they’ll suck on it extra long.”

Eight other men in the community shower room started howling.

One yelled, “When you’re paying for it, it can stink to hell, Bear!”

Gene grinned as he returned the bottle. Except for his crew cut, the guy did look like a bear with his craggy features, small gray-brown eyes and wide, sloped nose. A copious quantity of hair coated his body, too, including his back, but that’s where his similarity to any beast ended. Gene was highly intelligent and a student of philosophy with a gift for translating lofty ideas into common sense terms. The man was five years older than Skip and had been in the Army for three years before he had volunteered for Special Forces. They were both the same height, but the older man was more than twenty pounds heavier. Skip had been skeptical when told that this man was the munitions expert on the team, reasoning that the member would have to have nimble fingers and a delicate touch. Gene’s lumber-some appearance was deceptive because he had exactly the characteristics Skip had originally estimated were lacking.

Skip hefted the bottle and poured shampoo into his own palm. “You’re a better man than me,” he said, scrubbing his scalp and ignoring the sting of soap on his leech bites. He had been forced to duck under swamp water and several of the blood suckers had latched onto his face.

“Better man? How’s that?” Gene turned to rinse his shoulder.

“I’m thinking bed and sleep, not bed and play.” Skip yawned to emphasize his point.

“You’re only twenty years old? You’re the youngest man on the team. Man, you’re a pussyfooting boot with that attitude.”

“Meatball is saving it for Valerie,” joked Scotty Dern or Jekyll as in Doctor, the team medic.

Their communications expert, “Kitty,” Orville Blakely from Alabama, added dramatically, “Tha’ lil’ ol’ gal has attributes worth dyin’ fo.”

Remembering the sight of the short blonde in her bust-hugging, flaming-red tank top, the others laughed in appreciation.

Skip soaped his thighs and chuckled. Valerie had visited the base about seven weeks ago when he had been attending a new weaponry

training class and maintaining a fairly normal schedule. Other than his month leave the previous fall, he hadn't seen her since taking a short leave around Easter. It wasn't a requirement of the Special Forces, but none of the non-commissioned men on the team were married, and noting Skip's lack of serious interest, each had professed to be in love with the top-heavy blonde.

"Bet they'll be plenty of hearts and flowers at next week's reunion, eh?" Gene twisted off the shower knobs and grinned.

Skip sprayed his face one more time before turning off his water, too. Pivoting, he grinned back at the man. "Is there a female equivalent of you lurking in those backwoods you call home?"

"Ha. Skeppare, you want to know the kind of woman I hanker for?" Gene didn't wait for an answer. "No disrespect to your lady friend, Valerie, but her type leaves me cold. I like a big brassy babe with real fiery hair. Mm. And a temper to match. There's nothing quite like a rumpus with an angry redhead, especially the passionate making up that follows." Drying himself, he nodded. "Aaayuh, the gal who traps this fellow will have to be a strapping, flame-tressed wench full of sass."

Elisabeth Lindstrom's name came into Skip's mind. Recalling her size and smart mouth, he bet she'd grown up to be exactly the type Gene had described. He knew that Alaric had married Eric's widow, and once, pre-Army, had asked the architect about Lish. The man had been very reserved in his comments, and Skip had gotten the impression that things were not right in Alaric's relationship with his niece, but he hadn't pressed it. Lish was hardly *his* type. Remembering now Kay's promise of voluptuousness, he figured that she would be developing with the right curves for his taste, but she was too young for him.

Skip draped a towel around his waist and collected his gear. Curious about both Lindstrom sisters, he decided to drop in on Alaric when he was home on leave and inquire after the girls.