

## Chapter One

# A Gift From the Past

A chill April rain fell outside Chicago's Field Museum, drenching the wide black umbrellas that protected the designer gowns, suits, and hairstyles of the arriving guests. They came in couples or small groups, checked their coats and umbrellas, and found their way to the reception in the Founders' Room, a venerable chamber with the feel of old money. The room's reception area held a collection of fine artifacts never seen by the general public. A massive, ornately-carved fireplace greeted guests with a roaring blaze. Two large crystal chandeliers cast a soft light from the high ceiling onto the guests mingling below.

The room was full, but not too full—the mark of a well-planned event. White-coated servers maneuvered deftly among the clusters of chatting guests, offering appetizers or glasses of champagne. The selection of baked appetizers reflected a bias for salmon—perhaps because the hostess had been craving it when she planned the menu. Fortunately, most of the guests seemed to like salmon.

Ben Corbin, who did not like salmon, stood by a table of cheese-based hors d'oeuvres and watched his wife work the crowd. Two hours ago, Noelle had been a no-nonsense accountant, but now she had fully morphed into the role of society hostess: bright smile, well-coifed brown hair, unostentatious—but not inexpensive—diamond jewelry, and an elegant blue sheath dress that complemented her athletic figure and matched her brilliant sapphire eyes. Her dress had been let out a little in the middle to make room for her expanding belly; she was four months pregnant with their first child and just starting to show.

Shortly after Ben and Noelle had told his mother the happy news, she had commented to Ben that pregnant women “glow.” Ben had privately questioned whether *glow* was an appropriate synonym for “exhausted, moody, and nauseated,” but now he saw what his mother had meant. Tonight, Noelle glowed. She radiated happy expectancy and never tired of answering the same questions about how far along she was, how she was feeling, whether they had settled on names yet, and so on.

Ben put down his plate and sauntered over to intercept his wife as she walked from one group of guests to another. “Having fun?” he asked as he fell in stride beside her.

“Yeah,” she said distractedly as she quickly scanned the crowd for new arrivals she hadn’t greeted yet. There were at least two dozen, and more on the way.

Ben followed her gaze. “Too much fun?”

“Yeah. I’ve got to say hi to Senator Fintzen and Justice Gaido. Could you go talk to those people over there?” She nodded in the direction of a group just leaving the name tag table. “That’s Gunnar Bjornsen and his family.”

“No problem.”

Ben sauntered over to a group composed of two young men in their twenties, an attractive woman of about fifty, and an imposing sixtyish patriarch. The younger men were both blond and handsome; otherwise, they looked nothing alike. The older one had slightly unkempt long hair, earrings in both ears, a paunch, and a Bohemian air. His younger companion had short-cropped hair, a lean, muscular build, and a well-tailored Brooks Brothers suit.

*He looks like he just stepped out of a Young Republicans leadership meeting,* thought Ben.

Both men were over six feet tall, but they were dwarfed by the man whom

Ben guessed to be Gunnar; he stood at least six feet four and still had the arms of a weightlifter, despite his age.

The two young men talked to the woman, an elegant, aristocratic-looking lady whom Ben assumed was their mother. The older man loomed over the little group, saying nothing, but scanning the crowd with intense, pale gray eyes. His craggy face wore an undisguised look of displeasure, though it wasn't clear what had upset him.

"Hello," Ben said as he walked up smiling. "My name is Ben Corbin. Thank you for coming to the reception tonight." He glanced at their name tags. "Are you related to the Bjornsens of Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals?"

The storm clouds on the older man's face darkened further. "I *am* the Bjornsen of Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals." His basso profundo voice had a trace of a Scandinavian accent.

*Oops.* Ben's smile didn't waver. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he replied, extending his hand. "Thank you for your company's generosity in making this exhibition possible. I know the museum is very excited to be able to display artifacts from a royal Viking burial. I'm personally looking forward to spending an afternoon or two in the exhibition hall."

"So am I," said the big man as he shook Ben's hand with a firm grip. "Gunnar Bjornsen. This is my wife, Anne, and our sons, Markus and Tom." The sweep of his hand identified the Bohemian as Markus and the Republican as Tom. "My brother Karl runs Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals now," he continued with a trace of bitterness in his voice, "so I never saw the final selection of pieces for this exhibition."

"Oh." Momentarily at a loss for words, Ben wished he had paid more attention when Noelle had briefed him on the guest list last week. "I . . . well, I hope you like the choices he made. I've seen pictures of some of the items, and

they look terrific.”

Anne Bjornsen took pity on him and changed the subject. “Are you the same Ben Corbin who won that lawsuit against the terrorists?”

Five months ago, Ben had discovered that a routine breach of contract lawsuit was actually a battle over possession of a deadly biological weapon. “That’s me. I had a lot of help, though—and I had no idea I was up against terrorists when I took the case.”

“I read about that in the papers,” commented Gunnar. “Very impressive. But I assume litigating against terrorists isn’t a standard part of your practice—or is it?”

“If I did that full time, I would have a very short career. No, that’s the first—and hopefully the last—time I take on a case like that. My real specialty is business disputes: breach of contract cases, shareholder fights, things like that.”

Gunnar looked at him with interest. “Is that so? I’d like to—” he began, but Noelle’s voice over the speaker system cut him off. “Thank you all for coming. As you know, we’re here tonight to celebrate the tremendous generosity of Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals. They have made it possible for the Field Museum to be the first American museum to display artifacts from the Oseberg excavations and the Trondheim Riksmuseum. Let’s welcome Karl Bjornsen, president of Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals, to the Field Museum.”

“Please excuse me,” said Gunnar. He turned abruptly on his heel and headed for the door. The other attendees applauded as a large man approached the front of the room, where Noelle and half a dozen museum worthies awaited him. He appeared to be a bit shorter than Gunnar, but burlier, and he had the same fading blond hair and fierce gray eyes. He walked with the confident, shoulder-swinging stride of a man who was used to having people make way for him.

While all eyes were on Karl Bjornsen, Ben also took the opportunity to slip

out of the room. He had never been a great fan of the windy speechmaking that went on at receptions and award dinners. Worse, when executives from corporate donors spoke, they often seemed to feel that they had been invited to do an infomercial for their companies. Now that Noelle had sat down in one of the chairs on the dais, Ben figured he could quietly escape. He made for the entrance to the exhibit hall, which was framed by wooden pillars and a lintel carved with entwined geometric patterns, mimicking the entrance to a Viking hall.

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Back at the reception, Karl Bjornsen walked up to the podium and looked out over the crowd. He recognized a dozen CEOs and other senior executives, several reporters, and the head of a large mutual fund. There were lots of decision makers here tonight, and that was good. “Thank you, Noelle,” he began, with a smile and a nod in her direction. “And thank you, Field Museum. Without the partnership of this great institution and the hard work of its staff, this exhibition would not have been possible.”

Polite applause.

“I am very lucky to be part of this great effort to bring treasures of ancient Norway to this new land. When I was a child growing up in Oslo, I remember going to the museums with my parents to see beautiful artifacts that had lain buried and forgotten for a thousand years. It thrilled me then, and it thrills me even more now, to share the glories of my ancestors with the people of this great city where I have made my home and built my company.

“But I would like to take a few minutes to tell you about a Norse treasure that is not locked in museum cases—a treasure that we can hold in our hands and that can change each of our lives. Last year, a hiker in one of Norway’s national parks got lost in the mountains. He wandered for days, growing hungrier and

weaker. He would have died of starvation and exposure if he had not saved himself . . . by starting an avalanche.”

A few chuckles rumbled through the crowd.

“How does an avalanche feed a hungry man? The rock and ice that thundered away down the mountainside that day uncovered a cave that had not seen the light of the sun for a millennium or more. And in that cave were some leaves and seeds from an extinct tree.

“The hiker took those leaves and seeds and ate some—but fortunately not all of them. After he ate, he had a new will to live, more energy, and he was suddenly able to think of a way to escape from his predicament. He managed to rip open one of his hiking boots and pull out the steel shank. He found a sufficiently hard stone and struck sparks off it into a pile of dry grass and pine needles. Once he had a fire going, he made himself a torch and limped along the timberline starting fires at regular intervals, which he knew would get the attention of the park rangers pretty quickly. They did, and he was rescued.” Karl paused for a moment to let his audience appreciate the story. “Quite a tale, isn’t it?

“But why didn’t the hiker think of that sooner? And where did a man on the brink of death get the strength to tear apart a hiking boot?

“The hiker was unable to guide the rangers back to the cave he’d found, so unfortunately whatever secrets it still holds have been lost again. But he did have some of the leaves and seeds in his pockets. Norwegian scientists began studying them, and what they found was truly amazing: the leaves, and particularly the seeds, contained complex compounds that acted together to make it possible for neural impulses to move through chains of nerve cells more efficiently and at greater speed. Theoretically, that means that these chemicals should make the subject’s brain operate faster and his reflexes quicker.

“Theoretically, that’s how it should work, but what does it *really* do? We knew the hiker’s story, of course, but that was only one individual and was hardly a controlled experiment. I wanted to find out more, so my company licensed the rights to perform experiments on extracts from these plants and make products from them. Let me show you what we found.”

The lights dimmed and a motor whirred as a screen descended from the ceiling. The crowd watched in complete silence.

Karl picked up a remote control from the podium and clicked. The screen came to life, showing two lab rats negotiating identical mazes. A digital display at the top of each maze tracked the rats’ performance.

“The rat on the right has been fed an extract from the seeds,” Karl said. “The rat on the left has not.”

As the video proceeded, the rat on the right finished well ahead of the other rat.

“On average, rats with the extract finished mazes twenty percent faster than those without it.

“But those are rats. What about something closer to a human being?” He pressed another button on the remote. The scene on the screen shifted to show two rhesus monkeys struggling to open clear containers with complicated lids that looked like blacksmith’s puzzles. Inside each container was an apple slice. Again, a digital monitor timed each monkey. “The results were even more impressive than with the rats. The monkeys who took the extract completed the same intelligence-testing puzzles in roughly thirty percent less time, and they were able to do more difficult puzzles than the control group monkeys. In fact, they did puzzles more difficult than rhesus monkeys had previously been known to solve.

“And there may be another benefit to this extract.” He clicked the remote

again and a picture of a monkey cage appeared on the screen. The cage was empty and two of the bars had been noticeably bent. "This is a picture we took last week. We left the bowl of apples too close to the monkeys one night."

A laugh ran through the crowd.

"But as often happens in science, our mistake led to a fascinating discovery: those cages are actually designed to hold larger and stronger monkeys than the ones we were using. There's no way that our monkeys should have been able to bend those bars – but they did! There was nothing wrong with the metal; we tested that. So the only possibility left was that these rhesus monkeys did something that rhesus monkeys can't do.

"We're doing additional studies right now, but our best guess is that the extract increases muscle strength by increasing the speed and strength of the electrical impulses transmitted by the nerves to the muscle cells. That's only a guess, but it happens to fit the facts as we know them today."

He turned off the projector and the screen recessed into the ceiling. "Many companies say that their products will 'change the world,' and virtually all of them are wrong. But I ask you to imagine a time when a firefighter can take a pill that will give him increased strength and speed of mind and hand before he enters a burning building; when our men and women in uniform can make themselves stronger, faster, and smarter than their enemies during battle." He swept his hands over the audience. "A time when any of us can make ourselves a little smarter and faster whenever we need to face life's challenges."

He held up a single leaf. "This came from a tree grown from one of the seeds found in that ancient cave. It is a gift from our past. It is also our future, and it is a future bright with promise. We stand here tonight at a meeting of the ages. Past, present, and future have come together, each enriching the other. Thank you for coming tonight. I hope you enjoy the exhibition."



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Ben crossed the threshold of the exhibit hall and paused to let his eyes adjust. The interior had been made to look like the longhouse of a Viking king. There were no windows, and the only light came from the entrances and strategically spaced “smoke holes” in the roof. Dark timbers covered the walls and sloped upward to form a steeply peaked roof supported by richly carved beams bearing images of dragons and serpents that intertwined to form complex patterns that confused the eye. Artifacts protected by Plexiglas cases were arranged to make them appear to be a natural part of the long hall. A collection of eight golden arm rings, each in the form of an emerald-eyed serpent swallowing its tail, lay carelessly arranged in an iron-bound chest, as if some warlord had tossed them there after returning from a raid. Two swords with gold-inlaid hilts hung from pegs on the wall, their bright blades still bearing the notches of long-ago battles. In a dark corner near the end of the hall, an ancient chair of exquisitely carved black oak sat in a rough circle with several modern copies, in which visitors could sit and imagine a conversation with the lord of the hall. To complete the illusion, one of the chairs held the hulking figure of a Norse warlord bent in thought and shadow, brooding over plans for his next conquest.

Ben decided to give his feet a rest and headed for the little grouping of chairs. As he got closer, he noticed that the clothing on the Viking mannequin didn’t look right, though the light was too dim to say exactly why. As Ben approached, the figure stirred and looked up. It was Gunnar. “Ah, Mr. Corbin. I see that I’m not the only escapee from the hot air blowing out there.”

“The speeches do start to sound the same after a while. I figured the exhibit might be more interesting than the people talking about it.”

“Well, what do you think?”

“Pretty impressive, especially when it’s empty like this. They’ve really

created the atmosphere of another place and time. When I walked in here, I almost felt like I'd arrived early for a Viking war council and that any minute the king and his generals would walk in."

Gunnar regarded him with an odd, piercing look for a moment. "It's interesting that you should put it like that. I—" There was a noise behind them and Gunnar looked past Ben's shoulder. Ben turned and saw Karl Bjornsen walking up to them. "Gunnar!" he said in a booming voice. "I'm so glad you could make it to our exhibition." He was smiling, but it was the hard, predatory smile of the victor greeting the vanquished.

"I wanted to make sure you didn't screw it up too badly after I left," Gunnar replied. He stood and looked around. "It looks good. I assume someone else took care of it."

Ben shifted his weight uncomfortably and looked away, but Karl continued to smile. "You're right. I was so busy cleaning up the mess you left at my company that I didn't have time to work on this myself."

Gunnar's face hardened. "*Ditt selskap, sier du?*"

"*Ja. Og min teknologi som du stjal,*" Karl growled in reply.

Gunnar tensed and clenched his fists. "*Din helv —*" He stopped himself as he noticed a group entering the exhibit hall from the reception. "Excuse me; do any of you speak Norwegian?"

"Yes, I do," replied a matronly woman with white hair and a tentlike dress.

"How unfortunate. Since that is the case, I will limit my remarks to wishing you all a good night," Gunnar continued with an icy smile. "Even you, little brother." Then he pushed past Karl and out of the hall.

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Two hours later, the festivities were winding down. The bar was closed, everyone who wanted to see the exhibit had been through the hall, and most of

the crowd had left. The Corbins had spent the past half hour near the door, saying good-bye to guests. At last, even Karl Bjornsen and his wife had gathered their coats and were on their way out into the blustery night. As Ben watched their retreating backs, he leaned over to his wife and asked, "What's the deal with him and his brother? I thought they were going to start fighting when they ran into each other in the exhibit."

"I told you about that," replied Noelle. "They founded Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals together decades ago. Karl was the chairman and Gunnar was the president, but they set it up so that neither of them could make any major decision without the other's consent. That worked fine for a long time, but about a year ago they stopped agreeing. It turned into a feud over control of the company, and Karl won. He forced Gunnar out in a proxy fight about a month ago."

Ben vaguely recalled seeing articles about the brothers' battle, though he hadn't read them. "That was in the *Tribune* a while back, wasn't it?"

"And *Crain's*," replied Noelle. "A couple of the board members didn't want to invite Gunnar tonight, because they thought there might be a scene."

"There *was* a scene." Ben recounted the incident in the exhibit hall.

Noelle sighed. "I'm glad it wasn't worse. It sounds like Karl gave Gunnar the bump just as their company was developing a new product that could be huge. I've never heard of anything like it."

"What new product?"

She looked at him first with surprise, and then with suspicion. "You snuck out before Karl's presentation, didn't you?"

"I knew the speeches would go downhill as soon as you stopped talking," he replied.

She smiled affectionately. "Good answer, but you missed a really interesting

talk." She summarized the story of the hiker's discovery and the results of Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals' test results.

"Wow," Ben said when she had finished. "I'm sorry I missed that. So he's invented brain steroids, huh? I wish we'd had those when I was in law school."

One of the servers walked up with a question, and Noelle turned her attention to the aftermath of the party. "The caterer says there's seven pounds of grilled salmon left," she informed Ben a few minutes later. "What do you say we bring it home?"

"Brutus will love it," he replied. Brutus was their ten-pound cockapoo—fifty percent cocker spaniel, fifty percent poodle, and one hundred percent terror. Noelle had picked the breed, and Ben had picked the name. Brutus was still a puppy and had a huge appetite, particularly for human food.

She made a point of looking appalled. "No way are you giving it to the dog!"

"It'll stink up the fridge if we have it in there for more than a day," Ben countered.

"Okay. We'll take half, and it will be gone in thirty-six hours."

Ben knew she was up to the challenge. "Deal."

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Gunnar's car would have been uncomfortably silent had it not been for Markus's intermittent snoring. Tom nudged his brother, who was quiet for a moment before starting up the chain saw again.

Markus was drunk, as he generally was by late evening. After a contemptuous remark from his father in the parking lot, Markus had put in his iPod earbuds, tuned out his family, and fallen asleep by the time the car reached the highway. About fifteen minutes later, Gunnar said "Markus!" in an irritated voice. No response. "*Markus!*" he boomed.

His son bolted awake and cringed. "What?"

"You were snoring. Stop it."

"Yes, *sir*," Markus replied in a slurred mixture of subservience and resentment. He turned up the volume on his music and closed his eyes again. But he didn't snore.

Gunnar drove fast. He always did when he was angry. Early in their marriage, Anne would urge him to slow down, but she soon learned that there was no reasoning with him when he was like this. All she could do was wait for the storm to pass and pray that he didn't hit anyone. So far, he hadn't.

"Are you still planning on taking the boat out on Thursday?" she asked, hoping to distract him from his wrath.

"Maybe," he said.

"Did the weather forecast change?"

"No."

She debated whether to dig deeper and decided it was worth the risk. "Then why *wouldn't* you go sailing?"

He was silent for so long that she began to think he wouldn't answer. "I think I'm going to see a lawyer."

She leaned over and whispered, "About the boys' inheritance – about Markus?"

"No," he replied. "About the other problem male in the family."

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The Corbins walked into their Wilmette home and were energetically greeted by ten pounds of fur, tongue, and bark. "Whoa! Down boy!" said Ben as he tried to protect the pants to his best suit. "I just had these dry cleaned."

After Brutus's affections subsided, Ben and Noelle trudged upstairs, worn out by the busy evening. Ben changed into a pair of sweats and got ready for bed. Then he lay down and let his mind idle as he waited for Noelle to finish her

complicated ritual for removing her clothing, jewelry, and makeup after society evenings.

His thoughts wandered for a few minutes, but he soon found himself thinking about the exhibition. The intricately worked gold, the weathered runic inscriptions, and the sense that he had been walking among the ghosts of warrior kings all percolated in Ben's tired brain. He imagined mist-shrouded fjords and mountain forests growing over the burial mounds of ancient Viking lords.

Noelle walked in, interrupting her husband's Nordic reverie. "Hey, honey," he said, "what do think about maybe taking a trip to Norway? We've never been there, and it'll be a lot harder to take trips after the baby comes."

"That's true." She thought for a moment. Every now and then they had vaguely discussed taking another overseas vacation, but they had mostly talked about Asia, not Scandinavia. "We've also never been to China."

"Yes, but just imagine how good the Norwegian salmon will be. Also, I'll bet the plumbing is a lot more modern in Norway." Two years ago, they had spent three weeks touring southern Italy and Greece. During their travels, Noelle had found exactly one bathroom that was remotely acceptable by her standards.

"Those are excellent points," she responded. "But do you think you can take any more time off from work?"

Ben hesitated before answering. Shortly after his victory against the terrorists, and partly because of his sudden celebrity, he had settled a large trade secrets case on very favorable terms. The contingent fee portion of his compensation had amounted to two million dollars, plus one hundred thousand per year for at least the next ten years. That, combined with some good investing, meant that he no longer had to work unless he wanted to—and he often didn't want to.

He had a couple of cases that occupied about fifteen hours per week, and some pro bono work that took around five hours more, but that was it. He spent

most of his time reading, working in his woodshop, or watching old movies.

Noelle was not a great fan of her husband's newly relaxed lifestyle, and had said so on more than one occasion. Her question was therefore a dangerous one and needed a careful answer. "I *think* so. Things are starting to pick up at the office, but I should be able to make the time for a vacation. Besides, this will probably be our last chance before the baby is old enough to travel."

She thought about that for a moment and then shook her head. "Maybe *you* can take the time, but I can't. There's just too much to do. I've got two new clients with quarterly reports coming due, and one of them has SEC filings to make. And that's on top of all the other stuff I've got to do." Ben knew that most of that "stuff" involved catered brunches in large homes, luncheon board meetings, and charity dinners. He was surprised she hadn't put on thirty pounds even before she got pregnant. "Oh, and it looks like we're going to get invited to the Adlers' son's bar mitzvah. The Bishops and Gossards are likely to be there."

"That's nice," Ben replied with a yawn. "We can send him a card and a sweater from Norway."

"You mean we could if we were going to be there instead of at his bar mitzvah."

"You'd give up three weeks in the Land of the Midnight Sun for three hours making small talk with the Bishops and Gossards? They're nice people, but they're not *that* nice."

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. "You were thinking of taking three weeks off?"

"Okay, two weeks."

She shook her head. "I just don't have time, bar mitzvah or no. And neither do you. Going to Norway would mean even more time out of the office—and you couldn't possibly spend less time there without retiring."

Ben rolled his eyes. "If I take up shuffleboard and start complaining about how young people drive, would you stop bugging me about that?"

"No, I'd bug you about being boring." She changed her tone and tried again. "Do you remember what you said when we were thinking about going out on our own?"

He shrugged. "I said a lot of stuff. The only one that sticks in my head was that I was going to miss the free catered lunches at B&R."

"The one that sticks in my head was that you wanted to do something more important than defend the rights of Fortune 500 companies. Remember that? We prayed about our decision, and you said you felt that God was calling you to use your gifts to make a real difference in the lives of real people. What happened? Now that we've got money, is God calling you to spend more time sitting in front of the TV or to make Shaker chairs in the basement?"

"Man, you're hard to please! A few months ago, you were complaining because I worked too much. Now you're complaining because I'm not working enough. Make up your mind."

"I'm not saying you have to spend all your time suing people, I'm just saying you should do *something*. Maybe you could do some work for the Field. I could introduce you to some very interesting and charming people."

"There are plenty of interesting and charming people in the world," Ben replied testily. "Not all of them have five-thousand-square-foot homes and live on the North Shore. In fact, I'll bet a lot of them live in Norway. Who knows, maybe we can even find some rich people there for you to talk to."

She stopped getting ready for bed and glared at him. "Do you really mean that? Do you really think I spend over a hundred hours every month working for free just so I can talk to rich people?"

Ben sighed inwardly. Why did these speak-the-truth-in-love conversations



always seem to happen when he wanted to go to bed? “That was a cheap shot, and I’m sorry. No, I don’t think that’s the only reason you do it, but I do think it’s one of the perks. I mean, if there was nothing to it, would I have hit a nerve like that?”

“Let’s test that little theory,” she returned sharply. “Why don’t I try hitting a few of your nerves, and then you can tell me whether there’s anything to *my* comments. Deal?”

Ben chuckled ruefully and sat up in bed. “How about I apologize again and you forgive me and then I give you a backrub to soothe that nerve I hit. Deal?”

“No deal. As long as we’re sharing constructive criticism here, I want a real answer out of you on why you think it’s okay to spend ten hours a day putzing around here at home and only four or five in the office. And half the time when you’re there, I see you playing solitaire on your computer or surfing ESPN.com.”

“I need to remember to keep my door shut.” He yawned. “Look, we’ve had a long night and I’m beat. Can’t we talk about this over coffee and muffins in the morning?”

“No, we can’t. You’ve been ducking this one for months. I want to hear what you have to say for yourself.”

He flopped back down onto his pillow. “Okay, fine. The answer is that I worked my butt off for eight years after law school because I had to. Now I don’t have to anymore. I kind of like the change, but I’m not as motivated as I used to be. Maybe I should be, but I’m not. It’s a lot harder to drag myself out of bed at six o’clock every morning when the only reason I’ve got to go into the office is that I feel called to do it. Satisfied?”

She smiled. “Of course. I just needed to hear you say it. And I think you needed to hear yourself say it. Now, did you say something about a backrub?”

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Captain Tor Kjeldaas put the *Agnes Larsen's* engines in reverse and pulled her out of the slip she occupied at the crowded municipal pier in Yuragorsk, a small but booming port city tucked away in the far northwest corner of Russia. It was a starless, rainy night and the seas were choppy, but the captain welcomed the darkness and the foul weather.

The *Agnes Larsen* was a fishing boat, but there were no fish in her holds tonight. The Norwegian and Russian processing plants had dropped the price they would pay for cod, and the crew of the *Agnes Larsen* were feeling the pinch. So they decided to supplement their income by importing fifty cases of vodka with them when they returned to their home port of Torsknes, Norway. The Norwegian government held a monopoly on sales of hard liquor and charged exorbitant prices—usually three times or more the price in neighboring countries. The result, of course, was a brisk bootlegging business over Norway's long and sparsely populated borders and coastline.

Captain Kjeldaas steered his little ship cautiously, his leathery face a picture of concentration in the dim, green glow of the instrument panel. He continually made minor adjustments to the wheel and throttle, his gnarled hands moving with great precision and delicacy despite arthritis and dozens of scars from a half century of working these waters. His experienced blue eyes scanned the black waters for the subtlest change.

April was a dangerous time for sailors on the Arctic Ocean, even in calm waters and bright daylight. Warmed by the spring sun, icebergs calved off from the polar ice pack and coastal glaciers, drifting for weeks or even months until they finally melted. They ranged in size from huge floating islands, which could be easily spotted and avoided, to small chunks that were little more than ice cubes and bounced harmlessly off even the thinnest hulls. The truly deadly bergs lay between these two extremes—jagged masses of ice that barely disturbed the

waves rolling over them, yet could smash fatal holes into any ship unlucky enough to meet them.

The *Agnes Larsen* pattered along at only a few knots to minimize the risk from ice. Her speed was further reduced because the running lights were set as dim as possible to avoid detection by the Kystvakt, the Norwegian coast guard. Captain Kjeldaas was a careful and experienced sailor, but neither care nor experience were complete protection against the hazards of the Arctic Ocean. As he looked out through the rain-streaked pilothouse window, he saw an odd pattern in the waves a hundred meters ahead. He frowned and turned his craft a few points to starboard to avoid whatever was causing the water to behave strangely. Then a trough in the waves exposed a pale white mass several times the length of his ship. Most of it lay to port, but a long spar of ice jutted straight toward the bow of the ship.

The captain swore and slammed the wheel as hard to starboard as he could, but the wind and current pulled the little craft to port and she barely altered course. The captain gunned the engine in a desperate effort to give the *Agnes Larsen* enough power to answer her helm. She began to turn, but it was too late. "Hold fast!" he shouted to his crew as he braced himself against the pilothouse walls.

A second later, the ship lurched, shuddered, and tilted sharply to starboard. Men shouted incoherently belowdecks and objects fell and crashed. A loud, deep groan issued from the ship's timbers, accented by the squeal of ice on wood. Then came the sound the captain feared the most: a sharp crack followed by screams of "Water! Water! The pump!"

All at once, the *Agnes Larsen* rolled back to port and then rode level. The noises of wood and ice ceased, but the men still shouted belowdecks. Captain Kjeldaas swore again and hurried down to see how bad the damage was. The

*Agnes Larsen* was too small to carry a lifeboat, so if the ship went down, he and his crew would be adrift in the frigid sea. Hypothermia would kill them a few minutes after they went into the water.

Water sprayed in from a half-dozen leaks, but the hull planks had buckled in only one place—and that was above the waterline. The men had already started the pump and were breaking out the emergency patching kit. The first mate looked up at Captain Kjeldaas with a giddy, relieved grin. “She’ll be dry in half an hour, captain!”

The captain surveyed the scene again and nodded curtly. “Good.” He turned and went back to the pilothouse.

As dawn broke, signaled only by a lightening of the gray sky, the *Agnes Larsen* limped into Torsknes. Water continued to drip inside the hull and the pump ran intermittently. The growing light showed that much of her paint had been scraped away on the port side, which also bore several deep gouges. Captain Kjeldaas knew where his share of the vodka profits was going. In fact, he’d probably have to make another smuggling run next week just to cover the cost of repairs.

The ship cleared the sea wall and came into view of the dock. Captain and crew had expected to see a truck waiting at the dock to take their cargo. Instead, they saw a police car. Two Kystvakt launches floated just inside the sea wall, lest the *Agnes Larsen* try to run back out to sea.

Captain Kjeldaas set his mouth in a hard line and headed for the dock. He’d lose his cargo, of course, and probably get slapped with a stiff fine. That would likely be all, though. There were enough ex-fishermen in the police force and judiciary to ensure some leniency when an old sea captain got caught in the time-honored practice of rum-running. Still, the loss of his cargo, a fine, and the repair bill for his ship would come close to bankrupting him. He’d have to find a way

to make a lot of money fast—faster than he could smuggling vodka, and a lot faster than he could catching cod.

\* \* \*

*The evening was a great triumph*, Karl decided. *A great triumph*. He walked over to the living room window of his palatial sixtieth floor condo and looked out on the glowing Chicago skyline, replaying pleasant memories from a few hours ago—the interest and applause during his remarks, the enthusiastic questions about his new product from stock analysts and captains of industry, and the jealous bile in his brother’s face and voice. With luck, Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals’ stock would be up strongly tomorrow as reports of his presentation circulated.

His satisfied smile faded as he recalled a detail he hadn’t focused on at the time. Gunnar had been talking with a younger man who seemed vaguely familiar, but whom Karl couldn’t immediately place. He also recalled having seen the man with the hostess at some point during the evening. Who was he? And what had he and Gunnar been talking about in the exhibit hall during the speeches? Karl turned as his wife walked into the room. “Gwen, who was that man at the reception with Noelle Corbin?”

“In his thirties, brown hair, athletic build, good-looking, but a little on the short side?” she responded.

“You have an excellent memory of him,” Karl replied drily. “Yes, that’s the one.”

She laughed. Before marrying Karl fifteen years ago, Gwen LaCharriere had been a runway model known for two things: her elegant, raven-haired good looks and her reputation as a flirt—though she had always thought of herself as merely friendly. One of the things that had drawn her to Karl was the fact that he was confident enough not to be bothered when she talked to other men. Still, it was fun to tease him. “That’s her husband, Ben Corbin. He was in the papers a

while back – something about Russian terrorists.”

Now he remembered. He stood silent for a few seconds, weighing the significance of this new piece of information. “Chechens,” he said. “The terrorists were Chechens. They bought their weapons from Russian smugglers. Ben Corbin was the lawyer who beat the Russians in court and then hunted down the Chechens, wasn’t he?”

“That sounds right.”

Karl began to understand his brother’s interest in Mr. Corbin. He also began to wonder just how much Gunnar knew about Bjornsen Pharmaceuticals’ activities. This situation bore watching. Close watching. In fact, it bore more than that.

Karl considered what to do next. When he and Gunnar were boys, one of their favorite pastimes was to spar with long sticks. At first, Gunnar always won, because he was older and had a longer reach than Karl. But Karl eventually learned that if he could strike the first hard blow, he could put his brother on the defensive and control the fight.