

As soon as I've opened the file, Dad rises to speak again.

"What you are seeing is the analysis of an extraordinary study we've been doing with two males since 1992. They haven't left the ward ever since and furthermore have to stay separated from other patients. Also, they must be monitored 24/7."

I turn the pages with nervous fingers. The sites are stuffed with familiar looking statistics. There are many different medications listed, tablets as well as arterial infusions.

"Are they suicidal?" I ask lowly.

"Not at all. It's safe to say they won't ever kill themselves."

I look up with a slight frown. The common reason for people being in a security ward is due to a strong suicidal risk. "What did they do to be locked away, then?"

Dad heaves a deep breath.

He pulls out a tissue and wipes over his pale forehead, which has developed small droplets of sweat. It's anything but warm in here but it has nothing to do with the temperature anyway. These are the hot flashes he's been getting regularly. It's one of the many symptoms of leukemia.

"To tell it short, sweetheart: They are dangerous misfits. They were born with a very rare, genetic disease. It makes not only their appearance differing from normal people but also their brain functions. They were predestinated to develop schizophrenia, paranoia and delusions of lunacy, and sadly, they suffer from all of it."

I'm taking these information with dismay. What an awful fate to be born and condemned to a life in misery without having a choice.

Skimming further over the tables, I see an exceedingly use of Tranquilizers and Antidepressants.. "So the study is about finding a cure?"

"Yes, it is."

"Why the effort to keep it a secret? Wouldn't it be more effective to work hand in hand with other institutions?"

"Indeed. Though there are only very few people worldwide with these symptoms. This condition is so rare that there hasn't even been a name created for it yet. And clinical trials are costly, as you know. It's doubtful that other countries would participate with us, because, as cruel as it sounds, it does not pay."

Although I know his words are true to a certain degree, I don't want to leave it at that. "Wouldn't it be at least worth a try?"

"The prospects are very low. It's not worth the risk. Furthermore, this study is entitled a secret and must remain a secret. If the government knew about what we're doing, they'd immediately demand to extradite the men to them. And then they would get executed. We still have the death penalty in Nevada."

I am aghast. "They cannot be executed because of their disease, Dad!"

He holds my upset gaze. "Ashley, there is something you need to know. When Grandpa and Mum both had passed away, it was impossible for Tonya, Bill and me to go on without any help. I was forced to hire outsiders. They were two qualified nurses, so I falsely thought. One day, there was an accident and one of them stepped into the patients area without wearing the required transmitter. Unfortunately, they managed to poison her with an overload of painkillers, and she died."

Now I'm horrified.

I have been in contact with all kinds of mentally disturbed people, but there never were murderers amongst them. Until now, apparently.

Dad leans forward to place his cold yet sweaty hand on mine.

"You don't have to fear, sweetheart. This nurse has been too careless regarding her own safety. Look at Tonya - she's been taking care of the men since the very beginning, and no hair on her head has been hurt. If you obey the instructions to a T like she does, you are as safe as one can possibly be. This includes learning to use a stun gun. This might be difficult at first, but it's necessary. The most important thing, however, is a special transmitter you have to put under your clothes before you enter the ward. The patients have a chip implanted which will give them an

electric jolt if they dare touching you. It works the same way as the Taser - they won't become unconscious from it, but experience unbearable head pain and mucosa bleeding."

I feel the urge to block my ears. Apart from my appall about the dead woman, everything else sounds like a script for a science fiction horror movie.

I didn't even know we own appliances to do electrical shocks.

Our hospital has always been proud about dealing with modern therapies, and now I'm being told we are still using such cruel methods to protect ourselves? Can't we choose more human options?

"Compassion is misguided, Ash," Bill warns me as though he is reading my mind. "You have to bring the big guns in to keep these guys in line. A pleading look alone is not enough."

"Your brother is right," Dad agrees. "Our safety comes first. Nevertheless we're working hard to protect their lives and searching for ways to ease their malady. They might have murdered, but it would be a crime to execute them. They are not sane, legally speaking. Morbid genetics are nothing one can be held responsible for."

"Definitely not," I murmur, shaking my head at the thought of this inequity.

Although murder is an awful crime that must be punished, things are not always black and white. There is a gray area in between. And if these innocent diseased men are getting a second chance in life after misbehaving in the past because they hadn't known better, I'm all for it.

"That's not yet the end of the story," Dad continues. "Because we rejected punishing the patients, the second nurse threatened to tell the government. That would not only have ruined our hospital's good name, but also been the males' death sentence. Of course we fired this female traitor, but we also had to pay her a neat sum of money to prevent her from talking."

I sit motionless. I don't even know what to say.

"Now you see why we want you to take part in this project, sweetheart. We need someone discreetly, humanely and trustworthy."

I swallow with pressure, my throat is kind of dried-out. "I just finished my training, Dad. I'm lacking experience with such extraordinary cases."

"You don't have to do this on your own. We're there to help you. You'll work yourself into this just as easily as Bill has."

Unfortunately, his words don't help building my confidence.

My brother's education differs from mine.

He's more than just a nurse. He's been studying and focusing on abnormal and personality psychology. This fits most perfectly now, apparently.

Dad lets go of me and wipes off his face again.

"You're a pro in compiling statistics," he goes on, obviously not giving up in winning me over. "That's exactly what we're looking for because it's time-consuming. As for the close-up's with the men, you don't have to worry. Tonya will prepare you in depth for that."

Bill makes a scoffing sound. "Let her see the photographs. I'm positive it'll erase her reluctance straight away."

I eye him warily. "What are you talking about?"

"Just go to page fourteen and see for yourself."

I tense my lips and timidly flip through the file.

My brother must be joking.

Since when do I care about possibly pretty faces? Moreover, didn't Dad say their genetic disease affects their outer appearance? I am not imagining these people to be drop-dead beautiful, however, that's totally irrelevant anyways.

I don't care how good or bad patients might be looking.

And aside from that, I have a boyfriend. That nullifies every possible interest in other guys automatically.

When I'm at fourteen, my breath sticks in my throat.

The guy with the threatening smile looks young. Younger than I. His lightly wavy hair has a very uncommon grayish-pearly color, shiny and smooth-looking, falling down to his black-clad shoulders. His face is delicate-shaped, but he obviously has been into a fistfight shortly before the picture was taken because he is covered by several bruises, and his upper lip is cracked. There is blood trickling from his nose, which seems to have been beaten-up as well.

I gasp at the photo in utter consternation. And then, I'm literally sucked into the most catchy eyes I've ever seen.

Purple. They're purple like my hair.

However, his pupils are not like mine.

They're not round.

They're lightly slit.

Not as narrow as a cat's but quite close to it.

I stare in disbelief. Cold fright builds up inside me, along with an unintended fascination I cannot help.

"That's Keyvan Danyal," I hear my father saying. "He's called Pearl because of his hair. On the right, that's Kimoru Kizoku. Just Kimo, shortened."

I shift my gaze to the male on the opposite page. He's clearly older but owns the same mesmerizing purple irises and vertical pupils. He has no bruises, though. The only sign of violence on him is a bloody nose.

His hair is long and shiny.

It reaches over his shoulders, its color is a mixture of that special pearly-grey and ebony black. It looks beautiful, like professional strands, albeit the thought of a hairdresser visiting the security ward is rather unlikely. What I also find very unusual are both male's rather strongly formed eyebrows compared with their very fine hair.

I quietly clear my throat.

"Are they related?" I ask in an uncomfortably breathy tone.

"Yes," Dad says, "they are siblings."

I swallow, my eyes still glued on these young men with their so called morbid genetics. It clearly had been wrong to automatically expect them to be unappealing or even disfigured. Perhaps they are mentally distorted, but definitely not physically.....

"There you go, sis," my brother mocks me.

I snap my head around to him. "Nothing of the sort. Do you really think their obvious mistreatment is alluring? Their look rather disturbs me. The left one appears to be really battered, what on earth has happened to him?"

It takes Dad a moment before he answers. "Pearl can be very uncooperative sometimes. He is... a little difficult to handle." He is speaking slowly, choosing his words carefully. "We are forced to use the stun gun more often on him than we'd want. This weapon does cause mucosa bleeding, including the nasal membrane."

Distraught, I stare back at the boy's photo.

My heart is doing some extra beats in silent compassion.

I want to ask about the bruises, but I cannot do that right now.

I am too scared to dig further into this new reality, this unsettling world that has been proverbially existing in the depths of our hospital's building for so long, and I haven't even had the slightest clue about it.

"Sweetheart?" my father asks softly. "If you sign your new employment contract, you'd help to give them an opportunity of a more livable future. They would stay alive. The study would persist."

I look at him, scared and uncertain.

"I don't want to hurt them with the Taser," I voice feebly, horrified at the imagination of causing them pain and bleeding.

"Well, if you were attacked on the street, you wouldn't hesitate using it, would you?"

"This cannot be compared, Dad."

"Yes, it can. Both is an act in self-defense. Keep in mind that Pearl and Kimo won't die from the Taser, but they will definitely die if our project is not going to be continued. I cannot risk hiring a stranger who's perhaps trying to blackmail us again."

I run my hand over my temple and rub it nervously.

My brain is frantically searching for a resolution that satisfies everybody, but I quickly have to acknowledge that it's impossible.

"It would make Mum very happy, Ash," Bill suddenly remarks.

"Grandpa too," Dad endorses immediately. "And it would also make ME immensely happy. I tell you the way it is, sweetheart: My own poor condition warns me about wasting too much time for unnecessary things; things like interviewing a bunch of people for a job which my own daughter is perfectly capable for."

I gulp hard at this.

And then, I'm getting aware of Bill's gaze on me again.

I know he's upset because I'm about to disappoint our father.

To be honest, I'm upset with myself.

So I decide to do what my heart is telling me.