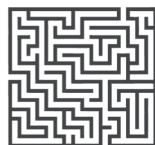


## CHAPTER 2



I 'm a total moron.

Liam froze halfway across the shopping center parking lot and facepalmed himself. What had he been thinking? A date? He knew nothing about that woman. At least he'd said *after* he located his sister, but still ... he didn't have time to date anyone.

His goal was simple: Locate Alexis and ensure they *both* boarded a plane to Myanmar. That was it. Flirting with small-town women who worked in puzzle stores was not on his agenda.

And he'd forgotten to give her a Gospel tract or talk to her about Jesus. What was wrong with him? Was he that twitterpated?

His upper lip quirked.

She was cute, in a Northwoods librarian kind of way, without the glasses or mousy brown hair. Her auburn hair flamed like fire when the light caught it. Her nose crinkled when she smiled, and her honey-colored eyes pulled him in like a bear to a beehive.

He should go back. To give her the Gospel, of course.

The customer left the store, heading for the last car in the front parking lot.

Demetria switched off the neon OPEN sign and the store lights and disappeared from view.

If he followed her, she'd think he was a stalker, and he didn't want to give her that impression. Maybe God would give him an opportunity to speak with her again before he left town.

Liam turned from the strip mall and scrubbed his hand over his face. Now what? The sun had dipped below the horizon, turning the western sky into a blazing array of red and orange. A sharp chill sliced through his suit coat. He drew a deep breath of crisp air. Another state to check off his list, but he'd rather have any other reason for visiting.

Alexis had better have a good excuse for disappearing on him. Tracking down his twin in this frozen tundra wasted valuable time. The mission board required a stateside debriefing between overseas assignments, but he'd planned on a twenty-four-hour turnaround without a stop at the apartment. If his flight hadn't been canceled, he would have been on his way across the globe and wouldn't have noticed her missing for another six months.

Why he'd ever agreed to let her stay behind at their home base in Albuquerque while he visited the Middle East—and then on to Myanmar in Southeast Asia—was beyond his comprehension.

He patted the flyer in his pocket. Escapology was worth checking into, as well as any other escape rooms in the area. He should have asked Miss Kayne, but since she'd never done one, he doubted she knew how many operated in the region or where they were located.

He sauntered down Seventh Street through the business

district. A lone vehicle stopped for the blinking red light, then continued, spraying dirty, melted snow.

*What brought you here, Sis? Why this town?*

He headed for the outskirts. Only a mile—a ten-minute walk on paper—but the wind chill slowed his pace and stung his cheeks. He tucked his chin into his chest. How did anyone live up here? And why hadn't he packed a thicker coat?

Because he didn't own one.

His assignments rarely involved anywhere farther north than the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel. And never in winter. Give him a humid rainforest or an arid desert any day of the week.

His dress shoes slipped on a patch of ice, but he caught his balance before making a fool of himself. Not that anyone was around to witness it.

Not a lot of hustle and bustle in Silver Falls.

Where were all the residents? Smart enough to stay indoors.

Unlike him.

The bus station came into view, and a man reclined on a bench beneath the awning. Broken brown bottles and cigarette butts littered the area. The overwhelming stench of unwashed body and acidic alcohol burned Liam's nostrils.

"Excuse me, sir. May I have a moment of your time?"

The man blinked bloodshot eyes and struggled to rise. The thin blanket covering his malnourished frame slid lower, exposing threadbare clothing. He ran a stained, wrinkled hand through thinning blond hair. "Huh? You talking to me?" His words slurred, and he eyed Liam with suspicion.

"Have you seen this woman?" Liam pulled out the picture. "She would have arrived in town a few days ago. On the bus."

The man squinted and leaned forward, taking in the thirty-six-year-old brainiac.

This photo from a few years ago always brought a smile to

Liam's face. What his twin lacked in fashion sense, she made up for with her sparkling chocolate eyes, warmhearted smile, and curious intellect.

"Never seen her before." The drunk shaded his eyes and scanned Liam from head to toe. "You a cop?"

"No, sir."

"You a preacher?"

"Of sorts."

The suit, tie, and polished shoes tended to lead people to that conclusion. Not that they were wrong.

He groaned and pulled the blanket over his head. "Let me be. I don't need no preaching."

Liam pivoted and shifted his backpack. The smell of coffee and hot grease wafted from a restaurant across the street. Knowing his sister's appetite, her stomach would have led her inside the moment she'd stepped off the bus. Would an employee remember her?

The bell jingled as he entered the Longboat Diner. The air inside was heavy and stale, layered with years of fryer smoke. Interior decorations consisted of an odd combination of Vikings' memorabilia, both the historical culture and the professional football team. Booths lined the walls, and four-top tables formed an aisle down the middle. None were occupied. Crackly 90s music cranked through speakers overhead.

A server wearing a stained purple apron over her jeans and turtleneck sweater carried a pot of thick black liquid and gestured with a fingernail the size of a bear claw. Her blonde roots showed beneath fading hair dye, the same vibrant violet hue as the stools at the old-fashioned bar. A pair of reading glasses topped her head like a tiara.

Her name tag read *Judy*.

"Go ahead and sit wherever works. I'll be right with you."

Special's on the board. Hotdish and pop for seven ninety-nine, don'tcha know." She disappeared through swinging metal doors into the kitchen.

A cloudy chalkboard hung over the bar.

What in the world was "hotdish"?

A second later, Judy returned. "You going to take a seat, ya?"

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry." His stomach growled. "I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"Did this woman come into the diner this past week?" He held out the photo.

She lowered her glasses and narrowed her eyes. "What's your business with her?"

"She's my twin sister."

Judy held the photo high, and her gaze flickered between his face and the photo. Grandma always said if they put a wig on him, no one could tell them apart.

Which of them should be more offended by that comment, he wasn't sure.

"She's not in any kind of trouble, is she?"

Judy handed the photo back, and Liam stashed it away. "I don't know. At least, I hope not."

"Came in earlier this week. No. Last Saturday. About the friendliest little thing I've ever met."

A smile tugged at Liam's lips—Judy's "about" sounded more like footwear. A flicker of hope stirred. "Did she mention why she was in Silver Falls?"

"No, sorry."

His jaw clenched. "Do you have any escape rooms in town?"

Judy's face scrunched up like a bulldog. "What's that?"

"It's a form of entertainment. Like a game."

Judy's head wagged. "Well, isn't that something. You'd have to go to Duluth or the Twin Cities for anything like that. All we've got is an old drive-in on Sunset Road, and it's been closed since forever."

She tilted her head and eyed him with concern. "You sure I can't fetch you something to eat, a cup of coffee to warm you up a bit?"

"I'm fine right now. Thank you." His stomach disagreed. "I *will* take one of those specials to go." He took a Jackson from his wallet.

Judy's face lit up. "You betcha." She pivoted toward the window, shouting, "Buck. One special," and turned back to Liam. "That'll be eight sixty." She scribbled on the order pad and tore off the receipt, leaving the yellow carbon copy.

Liam held out the cash.

"Let me grab your change." She took the bill and moved toward the register.

"Keep the change."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to." He reached into his suit coat and retrieved a Gospel tract from the inner pocket. "Would you be willing to read this in your spare time?"

"Is it religious?" She inspected the small pamphlet.

"It tells you how you can have a relationship with Jesus Christ."

For a moment, she squirmed like she would decline, but then she tucked the tract into her apron pocket. "I can't make any promises, but you never know."

"That's all I ask." He flashed the older woman an encouraging smile.

Judy sequestered herself in the far corner until his order came up. She packed it in a plastic sack with a soda can and brought it to where he waited by the door. "Here you go. I

added a slice of pecan pie on the house. I hope you find your sister.”

“Thanks, Judy. God bless you.”

He took the bag of food, left the restaurant, and crossed the street to the bus station, cheeks stinging, lungs burning.

The drunk on the bench sat up, rubbing his palms into his eye sockets. He lowered his hands, inhaled, and sighed as his eyes sparkled. “Whatchu got there, preacher man?”

“I brought you a little something.” Liam stepped onto the sidewalk. “You hungry?”

The man scooted to the right and patted the space beside him. “Won’t say no.”

Liam sat, opened the plastic bag, and withdrew the larger Styrofoam container. “What’s your name?”

“Garvey. Bill Garvey.”

“Here, Bill.” Liam handed over the takeout and dug out a package of disposable cutlery. “I have pie when you finish that.”

Bill raised the Styrofoam lid, and steam rose from the mound of ground beef, brown gravy, tater tots, and yellow cheese.

Hotdish, apparently, was some sort of casserole.

Bill’s bloodshot eyes grew large, and his hands shook as he tore open the clear plastic wrapper on the silverware. Gripping the fork in his left hand, he shoveled the hot meal into his mouth. Crumbs dropped to his lap. He picked them up and ate them too.

Liam popped the pull tab, set the soda can beside Bill, and lowered the bag, resting the pie container on the sidewalk.

“While you eat, would you mind if I told you about my Jesus?”

“Won’t say no.”

Liam hadn't eaten since before boarding the bus last night. He'd gone without food this long before, but if he didn't eat soon, he'd be sick. The Longboat Diner had closed while he talked with the older man. Bill hadn't accepted Jesus as his Savior, but a seed had been planted.

*Help Bill and Judy understand how much You love them.*

Liam entered a fast-food joint on the edge of town, ordered a stack of burgers and a large Coke, then slipped into a booth. Time to call the local hotels to ask if Alexis had checked in. If that didn't turn up anything, he'd try the hospital.

It took only a few minutes to realize Silver Falls operated few lodgings within Alexis's price range. The trust fund allotted her a small monthly allowance to spend on personal needs. She hadn't withdrawn any extra from the bank account, so her funds were limited.

Unless she had a sugar daddy ...

His stomach soured. That wasn't a possibility he wanted to entertain. Had someone lured his sweet, naïve sister under false pretenses? She'd always been too trusting. What if he'd failed to protect her?

Even though he was the younger sibling—by two and a half minutes—the responsibility to keep her safe had always rested on his shoulders. They'd gotten into a sticky situation or two over the years, but he'd made sure nothing truly bad happened to her. Not too terrible, anyway. Sometimes trouble just ... found them. Not like he went looking for it.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't exactly true either.

He dialed the handful of affordable motels and received the same answer at each one. Alexis Shepherd had not booked a room.

The fast-food employee delivered his meal. Liam offered

her a tract, and she accepted it. Once she walked away, he peeled back the yellow wrapper on one of his sandwiches and took a large bite.

*I should've insisted she come on the trip to the Middle East. At least I'd know where she was right now, and we'd both be on our way to Southeast Asia.*

He'd never let her out of sight again. Their last conversation had ended poorly, and his words still haunted him.

The burger turned to sawdust in his mouth. He forced it down, and it landed like a lead balloon. He glared at the remaining sandwiches. If he didn't eat, he wouldn't have the strength to keep up his search. With that in mind, he choked down the one burger and the soda. The rest of the wrapped sandwiches he pocketed in his suit coat for later.

Or for someone else in need.

Since the hotels hadn't panned out. That left the hospital. If something had happened to her, he should've heard—he was listed as her emergency contact in her phone. Unless she had lost her phone. Or the battery had died. Or someone had destroyed it to keep her from getting help.

His eye twitched as he pulled up the number for Superior Lakeview Hospital and hit dial.

“Front desk. How may I help you?” A female voice came over the line.

“My name is Liam Shepherd. I'm looking for my sister, Alexis Shepherd.”

“I can direct your call. What is her room number?”

Liam cleared his throat. “No, you misunderstand. I don't have a room number. I'm trying to find out if she's been admitted.”

“What was the name again?”

He closed his eyes. “Alexis Shepherd.” He over-enunciated each syllable. “I’m her emergency contact. Liam Shepherd.”

The line went quiet, except for the faint echo of typing.

Romans 8:26 flashed through his mind. *For we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us ...*

“Mr. Shepherd?”

He opened his eyes. “Yes?”

“I show no record of an Alexis Shepherd being admitted to the hospital. Is she using another name?”

If she was, he wouldn’t know what it could be. “No. Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate your help.”

“You’re welcome. Good night.”

Liam leaned back in the booth, stretched out his legs, and released the tension in his chest. She wasn’t at the hospital. At least not the local one. It was too late to knock on any more doors tonight, and most of the businesses in town had closed.

He tossed his garbage in the bin, then approached the employee who had delivered his food. She wore tight clothing and appeared ten years his junior.

She stopped sweeping. “Can I get you anything else?”

“I’m new in town. Is there a neighborhood you suggest I avoid?”

“Huh?”

His pulse picked up speed. This would distract him. “You know, a dangerous part of town.”

She giggled. “Not that I’ve ever heard of. Silver Falls is a chill community. We’ve got occasional shoplifters and mischievous teenagers, but nothing serious.”

His anticipation deflated. “No place where ... druggies hang out?”

“You might find a homeless person or two down by the docks in the summer, but not this time of year.” Her gaze swept

him from top to bottom. “You seem disappointed. What would someone like you want with a place like that?”

“I like to share Jesus with those who need Him most.”

“And you’re not afraid?”

Liam shook his head. “I know God will protect me.”

“You’re awfully brave.” She squeezed his left bicep. “Strong too.”

His cheeks grew hot, and he ran his finger under his collar. “Thank you, uh ...” He glanced at her name tag. “Cherry. You have a nice evening.”

She batted her eyelashes, played with the ends of her hair, and fiddled with the necklace at her throat. “I clock out in an hour. Doing anything later?”

He rubbed the nape of his warm neck. Why did this always happen when he tried to be friendly?

“Thank you, Cherry. I appreciate your invitation, but I ...” He wouldn’t lie, but he also couldn’t encourage her attraction. “I’m not interested in a short-term relationship.”

“Too bad. We might have had a good time together.” With a shrug, she picked up her broom and returned to sweeping the tile floor.

As Liam spun on his heel, his conscience nagged. If he wasn’t interested in a short-term relationship, why did he ask out Demetria Kayne?

They were strangers, like trains on different tracks. He would check out the escape room tomorrow. He didn’t have time to goof off. If Alexis had been there, her name would be at the top of the leaderboard. It should be easy to spot. He’d never known a leaderboard not to include her.

Liam left the restaurant and strode down the shoulder toward his motel. His phone chimed, and he dug it out of his pocket.

He frowned. A voicemail from Alexis? When did he miss

her call? He'd been in and out of range over the past couple of days. The message must have gotten delayed somehow.

His heart skipped a beat as he tapped the screen and put the speaker to his ear. Hopefully, she offered some kind of explanation ...

“Li ... am. I ... nee ... ed-d he ... lp-p. I ... I ca ... hant get-t out-t. I ... 've mis ... how ...”

Her words came out warped and choppy, and the connection crackled.

*What in the world? What's going on? Where is she?*

His chest tightened, and his entire body trembled. Breathing in shallow spurts, he returned her call.

Vicemail.

He tried again. Vicemail. Left a message.

He stared at the dark screen. *Where are you, Alexis?*

What had she gotten herself into? Why couldn't she escape?

Maybe it was time to get the police involved.

*Hang on, Alexis. I will find you.*