

NOVENO

BY

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Chapter 1

Having my bleeding flesh dangle off my naked bones was not the way I hoped to train to be an enigmatic personality.

It was never supposed to go this way. It was simply supposed to be a necessary training exercise that all employees go through at least once in their career. It was supposed to make me a better personality and a much more 'competent asset of the prestigious company that I have pledged my service to', but they...

I am getting ahead of myself. I-I guess I should start from the beginning. My name is Susannah Kline and I work as a Communications Engineer for a multi-national company called Cronius Corporation. Every year, they review performances of newly-employed engineers and select the best from every department to take part in the prestigious Endurance program organized by the industrious Perpetual Hope Enterprises. And, this year, the employees from the NOC department was me.

To be honest, I was highly elated to be nominated for the program. I did hear all kinds of praises for it, like how my predecessors had learned and toiled while they trained, earning them a good promotion when they came back. But I was also quite curious.

I took to the internet to search for the company that I would be spending the next few months in. Normally, a company this big should show up online, or at least be operating a website to represented it. But, no matter how many times I searched or even spell-checked my search to make sure that I was not missing anything, I was stumped.

The Visible Net left no traces of the ever-elusive Perpetual Hope Enterprises.

But how...

I looked towards the cabin where my boss was talking on the phone with an urgent expression on his face and narrowed my eyes. I wondered if he had some information of where I was about to go the next day. With my fingers involuntarily tapping against the graffiti-ed sun-mica of my desk, I debated with myself on whether it was a good idea to boldly question the credibility of the program. I found myself thinking silly, since this was a program that I heard many International Corporations stand by, from my colleagues within and friends outside Cronius Corporation. But,

even in all of that, there emerged a small nagging thought in my subconscious that I should follow my gut instinct.

Eventually, my gut won over my mind and I had found myself getting up from my seat and walking towards the cabin, where I could see my boss slamming the receiver down on the caller ID placed on the corner of the desk. I wondered if I should have turned around and walked back to my desk and realized that I was too late. I had already opened the door and walked in.

"And, look who has come in," Mr. Horowitz, my short-yet-stern boss smiled, "Congratulations on winning a ticket to the program. You earned it!"

"Thank you," I said, a bit to awkwardly. Praises always made me uncomfortable, yet it encouraged me. It was a quirky quality that I did not know how to deal with.

"Anyway," I composed myself, "Since this was the first time that I won it, the program piqued my interest and I proceeded to find out information on it."

I stopped to take a breath, while he stared at me with expressionless eyes, waiting for me to finish.

"Sir... it... I... do not find much about it... on the internet..." I hesitated and continued nervously, "To be honest, I could not find... anything at all... So, I thought of asking you if you tell me something about, you know, Perpetual Hope Enterprises..."

Mr. Horowitz stared at me for a few moments and shook his head thoughtfully.

"Well, Miss Kline, I would like to help you," he sighed and stood up, "But, we do not have the time to do so."

"I-"

"Susannah," he said, pursing his lips, "You have to leave now!"

"But," I narrowed my eyes after a few moments of puzzlement, "I was told that I was supposed to leave tomorrow."

"I just received a call, that due to some misunderstanding, we were under the impression that the boarding of all the employees was supposed to be tomorrow. I reconfirmed the date and found out that it was supposed to be today. I am sorry."

"But sir," I sighed with a little worry, "I did not prepare anything, or pack, or make arrangements..."

"I will send someone," he said, his stern nature surfacing, "who will wait for you to finish packing and will make sure that you are ready to move!"

"Sir, I really need more time to get everything ready," I said, with an underlying tone of starting an argument, "There are things that I need-"

"You will be provided with all that you need once you get there," Mr. Horowitz answered, as he widened his eyes and glared at me. I wanted to argue with him, to reason with him, but it looked as if he was going to have the final word after all.

It itched me badly to question his decision to hurry, but I had a feeling that the next question from me would simply get me thrown out of his office. Instead, I smiled with a nod and left the cabin. I sat back at my desk, to see my boss pick up the receiver again. He began to yell into the receiver and slammed it down so hard, that it almost fell off the table. I breathed a whiff of air out of my mouth. I was glad to have left the cabin without provoking his temper.

"What happened?" a familiar voice beside me asked in amusement, "Did you ask him to give us some extra Halloween candy or what?"

"Shut up, Chloe!" I said and rolled my eyes at her. In this stressful corporate giant of meeting deadlines and expectations, she was the one to create chaos within the chaos, and that was something of an art that strangely calmed me. She was my only friend at work, the only one who I had found to be sane to some level.

"I wonder what he is mad about!" she scoffed, nudging my elbow, "He is usually the one making us all mad. It is nice to see someone making him mad for a change!"

I shook my head and smiled. "I would generally disagree with you, but unfortunately I have to agree with you on this one!" I gave a small laugh.

"Does it hurt?" she pouted. I raised my eyebrows and gave her an exasperated look.

"Ma'am, it is time for you to get ready to board the bus." A voice, almost too smooth, spoke from behind my chair.

"Huh?" I said, muddled with the interruption to my conversation and looked up to meet eyes with a tall, dark-haired man, with manicured nails and well-pressed suit staring down at me.

"Oh, yes, yes," I answered and composed myself and gave Chloe a look, as I stood up to collect my coat and bag. I hesitated and looked at him, realizing something.

"... Wait, what?" I frowned, "Which bus? I thought I was supposed to get my stuff all packed up and leave in my car!"

"We will be accompanying you to your home, where you will be granted an hour to pack the necessary essentials that you think will be comfortable for you to carry. After that, we will drop you to the bus that will take you as well as the others to the desired destination."

With every word that was spoken in that sentence, his silky-smooth voice began to crawl under my skin. Even the way he had framed it began to irk me and pull the strings of my gut in an eerie way. Suddenly, I had the strange feeling of not attending the program at all.

As if on cue, the strange man replied, "Once the candidates are selected to attend the program, it is impossible for them to back out. The only way is to see attend the complete program."

"And what if I back out, because I simply cannot make it?" I narrowed my eyes, almost challenging him to answer the question. He did not say a word, as his gaze burned into my eyes.

"I am still waiting for my answer," I smiled at him. In my peripheral vision, I could see my boss get out of his cabin and walk towards me.

"What is going on over here, Miss Kline?" Mr. Horowitz frowned, as his eyes darted from the suited man to me, "Why didn't you leave yet?"

"This man has not answered my question, sir," I looked at him, "Did you send him, sir?"

"No," my boss replied and gave both of us a nervous look, "he is sent by the company hosting the training program. You are the last to be collected. I mean, to leave."

"Sir, did you just say-"

"There is no time, Susannah," he replied, "And you have already signed the contract. You know that you can lose your job and stay unemployed if you decline after the bond is bounded!"

"I read the contract and nothing was mentioned!" I replied incredulously, shaking my head in shock.

"Please step into my office!" he replied urgently and walked towards his cabin. It was then that I had realized that everyone's attention was on me. I took a deep breath and followed my boss to the office. He opened the file placed at the center of his desk, opened it to the page and handed over the file to me.

"The statement is here," he said, placing his finger on a small print encased in bold brackets just above my signature, "Read it!"

The print may have been tiny, but it was legible enough to form beads of sweat on my forehead. I read it in my minds, though the words rang loud and clear:

'If there should be any reason or circumstance of any and every context, believable or unbelievable, for the candidate to resign or retreat in any way, be it by forceful methods or his/her own accord, in a complete or partially sound state of mind, once he/she is bound in the contract of the program, she will be terminated to take up any and every position of employment within or outsourced by any or every organization, franchise and individual registered and linked to Perpetual Hope Enterprises.'

I could not believe what was written there. Had I have known, i would have backed out of the program even before I lifted the pen to sign on the dotted line. So, I was very sure that this mega-clause was not even present when I had signed it...

Or was it?

I gulped and wordlessly handed the document back to my boss. This job and this field was something that enjoyed doing and I found it difficult to imagine myself working in any other field.

I guess I had no choice. It was indeed time for me to leave.

As I walked towards my work space, I gave Chloe an alarming look, who turned back towards her computer screen to continue with her assignment for the day. I looked back at him, who kept staring at me till I picked up my belongings and headed towards the exit of my floor, while he followed me closely behind. I stepped into the lift and faced the door, taking in a good look of the floor in front of me, as the doors slowly closed my expanse of vision. The last image that I took in before the elevator doors shut in, separating me from my main source of livelihood, was a panicked face of my friend Chloe as she cowered at a shadow approaching her from the left.

The drive home from Cronius Corporation to my home seemed to stretch to eternity, not to mention sitting in the backseat of the 'not-so-conspicuous' sleek black car driven by 'not-so-Mr.-Creepy' made me feel claustrophobic for the first time in my life. I was only too glad to get out of the car a little too quickly and almost sprinted to my front door. I cursed at my quivering hands, as they sifted through the unkempt contents of my purse. Once I found the key, I did my best to open the door quickly and rush inside, but not without giving my ebony coffee table, the comfortable double-holstered couch and the mini fireplace one last glance, before I walked to my bedroom. It was going to be a long time before I come back home.

I wasted no time in grabbing the biggest suitcase that I possessed and shoving whatever I grabbed, without giving it much thought, into my bag. I did not realize how fast time flew, but the hour was up a bit too soon. And, without any warning, the strange man was standing by the door of my bedroom.

"I... am... done!" I said, struggling, yet managing to zip up my bag. Barely.

"Let's make a move!" he commented, before he left the house.

I followed him and placed my bags in the trunk of the car. After a silent and creepy long drive, we finally reached back to Cronius Corporation. I was happy to be back, if only for a few moments.

"This way, Miss Kline," he said, symbolizing with one hand as he opened the door with the other, to let me out. I did not like the gentlemanly gesture, considering the circumstances, but the contract did not give me a choice.

We were standing in front of the huge front gates of Cronius Corporation. Parked in a neat row in front of it, was a huge yellow bus. It was ordinary in looks, if not for the huge, strangely glowing, eerie orange writing on either side of the bus. Guess, this was going to be my ride to La La Land.

I could see 'PERPETUAL HOPE ENTERPRISES' painted on the side facing me. Which made me wonder, what could be painted on the other side. Since the door was on the unexplored side of the bus, I was in luck. It was some luck.

Slowly, I carried my suitcase and walked over to the other side. Yes, I was right. There was definitely something painted on the other side of the bus, which looked equally uncomfortable. And, it was only one word.

Noveno.

"Ma'am, the suitcases are loaded in the outer back compartment of the bus." the pot-bellied driver commented in disinterest, as he vigorously chewed on an old toothpick and point his fist-ed thumb behind him.

I sighed and walked over to where the creepy man in the suit, who had driven me, was standing there, ready to load my belongings. I rolled my eyes as I gave him my huge suitcase and clutching my purse to my chest at the same time. I realized that I came off as a tad bit over-dramatic, as he either chose to ignore me or did not care for my actions.

"Kindly board the bus, Miss Kline," he said, almost in a monotone, "We will be leaving for Noveno, the moment you settle aboard."

I gave him a look of exasperation and turned around, as I walked to the door and boarded the bus. I looked ahead at all the faces, as I smiled at the familiar and ignored the unknown, as I found an empty lone seat right by the door of the bus. Without hesitation and need to interact with anyone, I took my seat and fixated my eyes on the place that I had hoped to come back to, as a person worthy of leading someday. If I was honestly capable of that, though I hoped that the program would solve that problem for me.

As the bus retreated, I could see the corporation growing smaller and smaller with every meter of retreat. As the bus turned around and the corporation disappeared around the turn, I ignored the growing worry in the pit of my stomach of leaving something so good behind, to look forward to something promising and life-changing ahead of me.

Maybe, it was going to be a good ride after all.

Little did I know that, I would never leave Noveno alive.