

Chapter 1



Balancing her suitcase on the escalator, Peyton scanned the row of drivers as she descended into the arrivals gate. *Oh thank God, there's a driver holding a sign with my name on it.*

"Welcome, Professor Wilde."

"Oh, thank you. Please, call me Peyton. I'm so relieved to see you."

"Why is that?" he asked.

Suddenly realizing she couldn't possibly tell him she feared this trip was a horrible mistake or some sort of scam, she fumbled over her words. "Oh, uh, just a long trip."

"My name is Aldar. Please follow me to the van."

"Aren't we meeting the others?"

"No. Most arrived in the middle of the night. You're my only early morning pick-up. More arrive in a couple hours."

"I see."

As they approached the van Peyton slipped a crumpled piece of paper with her travel agent's emergency contact information into her pocket. Her palms were sweaty from clenching the paper, and she casually wiped them on her coat.

"Please, relax and enjoy the ride to Crystal Manor. Shall I put some music on?"

“Okay.”

He turned the radio dial on and flipped to a contemporary station. “Ah, this is perfect to acquaint you with our part of the world.”

As Björk started swirling in Peyton’s head, she leaned back, trying to ground herself. In the days before the trip, her concealable, low-grade anxiety had risen and started bubbling out. *I’m not good with new people. How did I get myself into this?* She had contemplated canceling. *A family emergency? Illness?* Her excuses all seemed lame. *How could I live with letting this chance go? How could I look in the mirror?* In the end, the prospect of a free trip to Iceland, surrounded by “some of the greatest thinkers of our time” was too intriguing.

But it was more than that. As a girl, Peyton lived in a state of hopeful anticipation. Great things were just around the corner. Magic fell like the snowflakes she attempted to catch on the tip of her tongue. At the age of seven her mother took her to a concert to see their favorite singer. There was a moment she would never forget, a moment that she clung to. Just as the lights went out, everyone sprung up from their seats and cheered. A surge of excitement coursed through her body. Her heart raced. She threw her arms up and cheered too. As the audience stood screaming, they were all connected. She was a part of something exquisite in that moment—the moment between the lights going off and the music beginning. A lump formed in her throat and tears of joy flooded her eyes, and the show had not yet begun. From that moment forward, Peyton lived with a lump in her throat, excited for what was coming and how she might be a part of it. Life was big, filled with the kind of possibility that has you leaping toward each day. There were math classes, chores, household arguments, visits to the dentist, bullies on the playground, bad moods, and other dimensions of life, but they didn’t diminish her hope. Curious whether other people felt the same tug at their hearts, she became fascinated with audiences. At movies or the occasional play or dance performance, she was always reprimanded by her father. “You’re looking the wrong way. Face forward,” he said, poking her arm. She never understood why he couldn’t see it wasn’t the dancers on stage, but the faces of those

watching that were most extraordinary. Over time she trained herself to “face forward.” Perhaps that was her mistake. She studied sociology in college and pursued a career as a professor, hoping to instill sparks of inspiration in others, but by her thirties her belief in the bigness of life had faded. The pit in her stomach had passed. Aliveness was elusive. Her belief in “what if?” had packed a bag, seeking greener pastures.

By all accounts her life was enviable. She was a professor at a liberal arts college and a published author. She lived in a safe, gorgeous community in Vermont. Recognizing her many privileges, and not wanting to appear ungrateful, she never said a word to anyone about her loss of hope. Loneliness set in. Her anxiety grew. She became uncomfortable around others. The smallness, the tediousness of life that she once rejected, had come to seem inevitable. At work, the reverberation of a simmering anxiety never abated.

The day the invitation arrived was impossibly ordinary. She was delivering a lecture to her theory class that she had given two dozen times before. Most of her students hadn’t done the assigned reading. As had become the norm, she continued on with her lecture, observing that Anna was online shopping, Celia was updating her social media, and Tom was asleep in the corner. She said nothing. Later, during a dreaded department meeting, her colleagues bickered about core requirements and teaching loads. Peyton stared out the window wishing to go unnoticed, much like her students whose complacency no longer troubled her. She stopped at the grocery store on the way home to pick up a prepared meal. At the register, the cashier, Harold, talked her up as always.

“What’d you get tonight?”

“Chicken.”

“Watching a movie?”

She shrugged, unsure if he made awkward conversation with everyone or if this was an attempt at flirting. It didn’t matter.

When she arrived at her apartment building, Mrs. Goldsmith was struggling to manage her cane while retrieving a package in the vestibule.

“Here, let me,” Peyton said, picking up the package.

“Oh, thank you. Always such a nice girl,” Mrs. Goldsmith said.

Peyton carried the parcel into Mrs. Goldsmith’s first-floor apartment.

“Would you be a dear and help me open it?” she asked.

Peyton nodded and opened the package. Mrs. Goldsmith looked pleased with the contents, a pink dress and cardigan set she had purchased from home shopping.

Peyton let herself out and returned to the vestibule to collect her own mail. She entered her apartment, changed into sweats, and poured a glass of Beaujolais. She was about to take her meal into the living room to Netflix something when she decided to sort the mail. In the middle of a pile of bills and brochures, there it was: the invitation.

Dear Professor Wilde,

Congratulations! You are among forty-nine gifted individuals worldwide that have been selected to participate in a five-day seminar in Iceland, in a seaside town outside of Reykjavik. This event has been underwritten by the Goodright Foundation. We will pay for all of your travel expenses and provide complimentary food and lodging at the spectacular Crystal Manor, a luxurious private estate and hotel. You will spend your time here engaged in structured discussions with your colleagues, some of the greatest thinkers of our time. You will also have opportunities to explore our unique landscape, referred to by many as the land of “fire and ice.” We have planned special excursions designed to inspire and create lasting memories. Participants will be divided into groups and given one question to answer during the duration of their visit, the results of which will be distributed among numerous think tanks aimed at global education, cultural enrichment, scientific research, peacekeeping, and social betterment. We can’t overstate the importance of the

results to emerge from this process. Your participation is vital to the success of the program. We do so hope you will accept our invitation.

Sincerely,
Gwendolyn Goodright, Director

She was lost in thought, remembering how thrilling it was receiving the invitation, when Aldar surprised her saying, “We are arriving. Those are the gates.”

She sat straight up and looked out the window. *I can't believe my eyes. It's extraordinary.* As they slowly wound down the drive the pristine manor revealed more of herself rising from the trees, behind her, water clear as glass, with mountains in the distance so defined they appeared as a cardboard Hollywood set.

“Welcome to Crystal Manor, Professor.”

* * *

“The main estate is on the left. That's where the dining hall, meeting rooms, and library are located. On the right we have a newer, more modest building, which is the hotel, where the guest rooms are located. Please, this way,” Aldar said.

This is incredible, Peyton thought as she followed him into a side door marked “Check-In,” which brought them to an unassuming reception desk.

“And this is where I leave you for now,” he said, placing her suitcase on the floor.

She looked around but there wasn't a soul in sight.

“Don't worry, Fana will be here momentarily to check you in.”

“Who?” she asked, but he was already gone. Looking at the door, wondering how Aldar disappeared so quickly she didn't notice when a beautiful, dark-skinned woman appeared behind the counter.

“Welcome, Professor Wilde.”

“Oh, gee. You startled me. I’m sorry.”

“My name is Fana,” she said, smiling brightly. “I am Ms. Goodright’s assistant. On behalf of the Goodright Foundation it’s my great pleasure to welcome you to Crystal Manor. How was your journey?”

“Oh, fine, thank you.”

“Very good. Here’s your welcome packet. I’ll escort you to your room so you can get settled and familiarize yourself with the information in your packet. Lunch will be served in the grand hall at one o’clock. That will be your first opportunity to get to know the other participants. Our intern, Diego, will provide a tour of the property after lunch and then will lead everyone to the main conference hall. Ms. Goodright gives her opening address at four o’clock. It is there you will be given instructions for the week.”

Peyton nodded.

“Right this way,” she continued. “You’re on the second floor.”

As they walked up the stone staircase, Peyton marveled at each detail: cherubs carved into the banister and lettering she couldn’t decipher.

“Your room is right down here.”

“Uh huh,” she muttered, enthralled by a statue of what looked like a mystical creature.

“Here we are, room 2-7,” she said, unlocking the door. “Please, after you.”

The room was charming. A bed dressed in cloud-like bedding, a long chest of drawers, and a small writing desk, which sat before the windows. Fana opened the white drapes revealing a view of green and blue as far as the eye could see.

“Your bathroom has been prepared with amenities but please don’t hesitate if there is anything you need. Dial the number one on your telephone for the front desk,” she said, handing Peyton the old-fashioned skeleton key. “There is a map of the property in your welcome packet. Lunch and all of the scheduled events are in the main estate. We look forward to seeing you at one o’clock in the

grand hall. Of course you are welcome to explore the grounds and main estate as you wish.”

“Okay. Thank you, Fana.”

Fana smiled before quietly letting herself out.

This is so strange. How did I wind up here? Don't do that, Peyton. Don't question it to death. Just be grateful and enjoy it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Yes? Did you forget something?” she asked as she opened the door. A young man with a mop of dark brown hair was before her, holding a tray with silver vessels and a vase of purple flowers dotted in white.

“Greetings, Professor Wilde,” he said in a thick accent. “I’m Diego.”

“Oh yes, sorry. I thought it was Fana. She mentioned you.”

“I’ll be giving everyone a tour after lunch. I’ve brought you a snack in the meantime. May I?” he asked, tilting his head.

“Goodness, yes, please come in.”

“I’ll set this over here on the desk.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll see you after lunch, Professor.”

“Please, call me Peyton.”

He smiled. “Chau.”

“Are you Italian?” she asked.

“Chilean.”

“Chau.”



Hungry after traveling, she inspected the tray—a beautiful fruit platter, cheese, a slice of ginger loaf, water, tea, and coffee. *They think of everything.* She poured a cup of coffee and nibbled on some fruit and the moist cake before remembering she was supposed to study her welcome packet. She picked it up, noticing a label on the top corner with her name and the number 2547-7. *Hmm.* She opened the folder to find a typed letter atop a large packet.

Dear Professor Wilde,

It is our great pleasure to welcome you to Crystal Manor. You are one of forty-nine participants carefully curated for this event. We ask you to take this responsibility seriously. Your participation is vital to the success of our foundation's mission. We hope you will see that we have spared no expense to provide participants with everything needed—nourishment, comfort, inspiration—to stimulate productive reflection.

In the enclosed packet you will learn about each of the forty-nine participants. Photographs are included. While you will have time to get to know all of the participants during meals and other informal time, structured meetings and excursions will occur in groups of seven. Information about the members of your group can be found on the second to last page. Your group's itinerary is on the last page.

Professor Wilde, you have been assigned a special role. One member from each group is designated the scribe. At the end of the seminar, the scribe alone is responsible for providing a written response to the question you are charged with answering (which will be revealed at the opening address). Observe carefully, listen to your colleagues, trust your intuition, and don't be afraid to change your mind. You needn't consult the group at the end of the five days. The final report is solely in your hands.

Wishing you a productive stay,
Gwendolyn Goodright

A special role . . . the scribe alone is responsible . . . the final report is solely in my hands. Why me? As she started learning about the other participants, flipping from page to page, reading each biography, one more distinguished than the next, her worry grew. A world-renowned chemist from India who had received his country's highest honor in science; an award-winning classical composer from Austria who was one of Deutsche Grammophon's top-selling artists; the most successful political cartoonist in the United States

with over forty awards and two hundred magazine covers to his credit; and on and on. *How did I get selected for this? I'm just a normal professor with a book that sold merely a few hundred copies. I don't fit in here. What were they thinking? Maybe it was a mistake. What will the others think of me?* Panic set in. She began to feel hot. A sharp pain coursed through her stomach. "Oh my God, I'm gonna be sick," she said aloud before scurrying into the bathroom. Eventually, with a settled stomach, she returned to the bedroom, grabbed the packet, and slid into bed. Propped against two pillows, she turned to the second-to-last page to learn who was in her group.

Liev: a renowned Russian neuroscientist whose theory of how brains process new information made him the most cited contemporary scientist in his field. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages.

God, he looks like Professor X from the X-Men. It's intimidating. Who's next?

Ariana: a well-regarded emerging Peruvian neuroscientist with more than twenty publications and grants in excess of a million dollars.

She's young to be so accomplished. Pretty too. I wonder if it's hard being a young female in her field.

Dietrich: a German philosopher whose analysis of Nietzsche changed the thinking and teaching across the field, garnering him a host of international awards.

He looks so serious, like he never smiles. Maybe it's just his glasses. I shouldn't prejudge.

Ronnie: an American visual artist who pioneered a new style of 3D collage that led to solo exhibitions at the MoMA, Tate Modern, and Musée National d'Art Moderne.

Funny, I always think of artists being eccentric but she's innocuous looking and kinda nerdy.

Harper: an Australian children's dance teacher. She runs a small studio in Melbourne.

Hmm, that's kind of a regular job, but she is in the arts, which is cool. She's really stunning. I'd kill for flowing blonde hair like that. I bet she lives on a beach. She has that look.

Milton: an American farmer who won Blue Ribbons at fairs and farmer's markets across New England for his organic produce including his unique hybrid radishes.

Hmm, a farmer. That's different. That's a regular job too. He looks sweet. Kind of old to come here alone. Must be at least seventy. Wonder what a farmer could possibly add to a group of scholars and artists. But even he's won awards. Why am I here? I'm just a sociology professor at a school no one's heard of. My students didn't even read my book. I wonder if it's because of that New York Times op-ed. That was just dumb luck. Stop obsessing, Peyton. You were invited just like everyone else.

She flipped to the last page to see a detailed itinerary. Breakfast was from eight to nine o'clock each morning. They had personal time each day from six to seven, followed by dinner. It was suggested everyone attend "nighttime opportunities for socializing" after dinner. The days were entirely structured with "brainstorming sessions" in designated locations, excursions (one day to the Golden Circle and another to the Blue Lagoon), a buffet lunch, and afternoon tea.

Tired from the travel and with her head spinning with information, she decided to take a short nap before lunch. Paranoid about oversleeping, she set both the alarm on her phone and the one in her room for noon. Nestled under the comforter, she closed her eyes. Before drifting to sleep Peyton had one clear thought: *What am I doing here?*